

# VIEW FROM THE CELLAR

By John Gilman

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**PHILIP TOGNI- FROM SWISS AND ENGLISH ROOTS  
COMES ONE OF CALIFORNIA'S ORIGINAL TRAILBLAZERS**



*Lisa, Birgitta and Philip Togni on their Spring Mountain property.*

Philip Togni has been one of the great pioneers in the world of California wine, having arrived on the west coast in the late 1950s and having quietly produced some of the finest wines of his era during the course of his long and exemplary career. Not surprisingly, for those who have had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Togni, he has often worked quietly behind the scenes and handled his affairs in an understated and professional manner that seems quite unexpected in this day and age of superstar winemakers and their attendant public relations machinery. But, this is very much in keeping with the personality of Philip Togni, who has been the man behind a great many of the finest wines the state has produced from the late 1950s forwards, until he was finally able put his own name on the front label and craft the first vintage from his eponymous winery on Spring Mountain in the 1983 vintage. Since that day, his own estate wines have been very much synonymous with age-worthy, refined and utterly classic wines that are primarily based on cabernet sauvignon, and these cabernets from Philip Togni must be ranked up at the very pinnacle of classic cellaring wines from the state, right alongside of those based on this varietal such as Ridge Monte Bello, Mayacamas, Heitz Cellar, Cathy Corison's and Mount Eden Vineyards at the very apex of California wines produced from this fine grape. His resume reads

like a who's who of California wine in the formative years of the business, with stops at Mayacamas Vineyards, Chalone Vineyard (it was actually Philip who suggested the name of Chalone for the property when he arrived there in 1960, which at that time was called "El Venido", and which it has proudly worn ever since), Chappellet Vineyard and Cuvaision, prior to releasing his first vintage from his own property on Spring Mountain in the 1983 vintage. His has been a vinous journey of great depth and magnitude, and he has seen more than his share of changes in the world of California wine since he first arrived here with a degree in oenology from the University of Bordeaux (with prior oenological studies also at the National School of Agriculture at Montpellier), after stopovers right out of school making wine in a very rudimentary Chilean wine business and in Algeria in the midst of the civil war in that country in the mid-1950s.

As Philip likes to recall, it was not necessarily his original dream to make wine when he first started out as a young man on his career trek, but rather "my happening to somehow having been in the right place at the right time on several occasions early on in my career." His grandfather was raised in the Swiss canton closest to the Italian border and migrated as a very young man to England. Philip was born in 1926 in the town of Windsor. He was educated in England and did his military service in the British army, prior to earning a degree in geology from London University and then working in oil exploration for Royal Dutch Shell in Peru and Colombia. Having successfully struck oil for the company in a few places, he was vacationing in Spain in the early 1950s when he crossed paths with famed Oenology professor, Maynard Amerine, godfather of the University of California at Davis' School of Oenology, who just happened to be on sabbatical at the same time in Madrid that Philip was getting some R and R in the city. They struck up a conversation and Philip ventured that he might like to try his hand at making wine. Maynard Amerine responded that there were really only four places in the world at that time to properly study oenology: the university in Geisenheim, Germany, "if one wanted to learn how to make white wines", UC-Davis, or the French Oenological Departments at the National School of Agriculture at Montpellier or at the University of Bordeaux. Philip recalls that the French government had just started a program to really promote studies of winemaking, and he enrolled for "a bit more than a year" at the *Grande Ecole* at Montpellier, before starting to work in Algeria, which under French colonialism was one of the biggest producers of *vin ordinaire* and blending wines in the greater French cultural empire. However, it was not the best time to be in Algeria, as the war for independence was in full swing during his time there in 1955 and 1956, and his job blending wines for a large *négociant* just south of Algiers was not the best location to be at that time. Happily, at the recommendation of Dr. Amerine, Alexis Lichine sought Philip out to come work at his Château Lascombes property in Margaux, rescuing him from the vicissitudes of the Algerian war and he became the assistant manager of Lascombes in 1956 and made the 1956 vintage here, while also returning to school and finishing up his degree at the University of Bordeaux. At the University of Bordeaux, he studied under the famed oenology professor, Emile Peynaud. As Philip Togni recalls about his *stage* at Château Lascombes, "the 1956 was a terrible vintage, but from my stay at Lascombes I began to have an understanding for the beauty of really old wine, for Alexis Lichine opened up a bottle of Lascombes from the 1896 vintage one day for special visitors and it really opened my eyes to how much better wines became with long aging." This quest to make very long-lived wines would become one of the hallmarks of Philip Togni's wines throughout his career. As he has often been quoted, his stylistic paradigm at this time were the wines of famed Ste. Estèphe estate,

Château Calon-Ségur, and he thought “maybe one day, I will be able to make wines as long-lived as those at Calon-Ségur.”

Upon the completion of his degree at the University of Bordeaux in 1957, Philip returned again to Latin America, this time to try his hand at making wine in Chile. He felt that there was unrealized opportunity in the wine business here, and spent a few years there trying to shake up the sleepy Chilean wine industry and try to make something of more merit. As he observes, “the wine business in Chile back in the late 1950s was nothing like it is today, and probably a third of our production that year was made by soaking the crushed pips and skins in alcohol to stretch things a bit” and he laughs, “I guess I was probably just a bit ahead of the curve at that time.” He would end up spending two years here in Chile, from 1957 to 1959, but by the end of this *stage* he was ready for new challenges and turned his sights on California. In 1959 he arrived at his first California winery, Mayacamas Vineyards up on the top of Mount Veeder. This was still nearly a decade before Bob Travers would buy the property and really stake a claim as America’s finest cabernet sauvignon producer with the release of his inaugural vintage of 1968 at Mayacamas, but Philip certainly had a hand in that eventual success, as his first project at Mayacamas was planting cabernet sauvignon vines on this Mount Veeder property. As he recalls, “Mayacamas was owned by the Taylor family in this era and almost all of the property was planted to white wine varieties at this time- a lot of chardonnay- and I was in charge of putting in several cabernet sauvignon vineyards during my stay there, while making the 1959 vintage.” This *stage* at Mayacamas would become very much emblematic of Philip Togni’s early career, as he seemed to be always either laying the foundation wherever he went or realizing the first critical acclaim for the wineries he worked for prior to opening his own winery, and when one looks at the very early trailblazers in the California wine world, Philip Togni is right up there with the likes of people such as André Tchelistcheff, Lee Stewart and Joe Heitz. It is interesting to note that all of these luminous pioneers from the early days of California fine winemaking all shared a propensity for crafting long-lived wines built for the cellar, and certainly looked to European wines as their inspiration in these first heady days of fine wine production in northern California. Certainly, the French paradigm of elegance and longevity for red wines was something that Mr. Togni discovered during his time at Château Lascombes and it would never stop serving as his guiding star through all of the changes of current and climate that the California wine business would swing through as fashions changed throughout the extended length of his fine career.

After his one year stay at Mayacamas, Philip was hired to be the first winemaker at a remote property in the Gavilan Mountains up above Soledad, ninety-odd miles south of San Francisco, to which Philip would give the name of Chalone Vineyard. At the time, Chalone was owned by two gentlemen, Jack Sigman and Dr. Ed Liska, and the property was called El Venido. As Philip recalls, “it was a no-brainer” coming up with the name, “as Mount Chalone looms over the vineyard” at an elevation of three thousand feet. No wine had been commercially produced here, despite vines having been planted originally at the end of the nineteenth century, by a French émigré named Charles Tamm, who thought the chalky soils reminded him of Burgundy (hard to imagine this hardscrabble and very arid, high desert chaparral would remind him of Burgundy, but he was indeed correct in finding his beloved limestone to grow vines in up here on this remote ridge)! The property had changed hands frequently in this high and sparsely populated corner of California and Philip arrived here in 1960 very much as a pioneer. As he

recalls about that time, “no wine had ever been made here, despite the 1920 planting date” of most of the vineyards. He would lay the groundwork here for Chalone’s future success during his stay from 1960 to 1962 (just as he had done a bit at Mayacamas), for only a few years after his departure, Dick Graff would purchase the property in 1965 and fully put Chalone Vineyard on the wine map of California over the ensuing decades. The vineyards at Chalone that were extant when Philip arrived in 1960 had been planted in the 1920s, by the then owners of the property (Will Silvear and his brother), and which would eventually make the property famous in the 1970s: pinot noir, pinot blanc, chardonnay and chenin blanc. At least this is what the current owners thought when Philip Togni arrived in 1960, but it turned out that a great many of the vines that were purported to be pinot noir turned out to be zinfandel! Philip stayed on at Chalone for three years, before being hired at Central Coast giant, Gallo, to oversee a project to plant high quality varietals in the Gallo family’s vineyards, and he made hundreds of experimental lots of wines from a wide variety of grapes during his three year stay in Modesto, again setting the stage for the jug wine giant’s switch to varietal bottlings later in the late 1970s and 1980s.

After his three years at Gallo (1962 through 1965), Philip Togni was once again back in his pioneering mode, joining southern Californian transplant, Donn Chappellet, who had sold his sizable home in Malibu and moved north to use the proceeds to purchase vineyard land on Pritchard Hill, east of Rutherford. The property had just had some vines planted in 1964, a few years prior to the Chappellet family’s purchasing the land in 1967, with a typical mix for those early days in Napa Valley of chenin blanc, gamay, riesling and cabernet sauvignon. I asked Philip what it was like to make the move from the world’s largest winery at Gallo to a complete start up winery and he responded, in a word, “fun.” Philip Togni arrived here in 1967 and produced the first six releases from the estate, including the first year’s production of five hundred cases of a 1968 Chenin Blanc and two hundred cases of 1968 Cabernet Sauvignon. When Chappellet opened its doors in 1968, the winery here on the property had not even been built, and Philip Togni made the wine at rented cellar space at neighbors, including parking the cabernet at Joe Heitz cellars over on Highway 29 and making the chenin at Robert Mondavi’s new winery (which had only been completed in 1966). The next year would see the new winery completed and fully put Chappellet on the California wine map, as the 1969 cabernet sauvignon fashioned by Philip is considered one of the great classics of California cabernet history, and the wine is purported to continue to drink with youthful vigor and great complexity at age forty-five (I have never had the good fortune to cross paths with this west coast legend). The wine spent twenty months in barrel prior to bottling, which would become the norm for all of the great cabernets that Philip Togni has crafted over the years. As Philip recalls about the ’69 Chappellet, “we were probably pretty lucky with the 1969 cabernet, for back in those days we were pretty straightforward, just growing good grapes, crushing them and putting them in barrels to age up until bottling.” But, looking back, he feels that “the ’69 Chappellet was probably one of the finest wines I have ever made in my career- it still could even use a few more years of bottle age- and we were lucky, as the cabernet vines here developed leaf roll disease the very next year and we never quite got the same perfect ripeness of the ’69 in the following vintages such as the 1970, 1971 or 1973.” He would oversee the planting of more cabernet sauvignon vineyards on Pritchard Hill during his stay at Chappellet.

In 1974, Philip Togni was hired to be a consultant at Cuvaision on the Silverado Trail, and the following year he would become the winery’s full-time winemaker and President. The



winery had been founded only five years earlier by Thomas Cotrell and Thomas Parkhill, who had purchased twenty-seven acres of potential vineyard lands in Calistoga on which to build the grape foundation for the estate, with seven acres having been planted by the time of Philip's arrival. In 1974, the two partners sold the winery and vineyards to Oakleigh Thorne, who was principally involved in the publishing business in New York, and it was he who quickly brought in Philip as winemaker and head of the estate. It turned out that the seven acres of vineyards that were already planted were not ideal, as the soil was a deep clay, and Philip Togni never produced any Cuvaision wines from these grapes. Eventually the vineyards would be sold, but during Mr. Togni's tenure at Cuvaision, the three wines produced here- cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay and zinfandel- were all produced from purchased grapes from hillside vineyards. In 1979 the winery again changed hands, as Alexander Schmidheiny of Switzerland purchased the estate from Mr. Thorne. A year after buying the winery, the Schmidheiny family also purchased four hundred acres of potential vineyard land in Carneros, which were found by Philip. The pastureland would be cleared and planted over the ensuing years, so that the Cuvaision wines of today are principally made from Carneros fruit and quite a bit different in personality than the wines produced here during the Togni era, when the grapes came from hillside plantings further north. Philip Togni stayed on at Cuvaision from his first vintage of 1975 through the 1981 vintage, until the time he was ready to devote himself full-time to his own project and the inaugural release of his first wines under the Philip Togni Vineyard label in the 1983 vintage.



*The Togni Family's beautiful vineyards far up the side of Spring Mountain.*

Philip and his wife, Birgitta had already purchased an old, abandoned vineyard property up on Spring Mountain back in 1975, two thousand feet above the valley floor, which as Philip recalls, “was primarily for a home for our family, but vines had been planted here back in the late 1800s- though nature had had her way with them for a very long time when we first arrived.” When I asked him how he and his wife had settled on the Spring Mountain property back in 1975, he replied “it was an easy commute over to Cuvaision, and it was also the only property on the market at the time!” From 1975 until the land was ready for vines to be planted in 1981, Philip and Birgitta made the clearing of the land up here on Spring Mountain their weekend projects, with almost all of the clearing work done by the two of them by hand, as they studiously chipped away at clearing and replanting ten acres of former vineyard land on the property. The ten acres were planted with both sauvignon blanc (“as we really needed to have a bit of white wine” observes Philip, “and there was just too much chardonnay for my tastes already in Napa at that time”), and cabernet sauvignon and other Bordeaux varietals, such as merlot, cabernet franc and petit verdot. The sauvignon blanc would have a nice run from 1983 until the 1994 vintage, when the vines eventually succumbed to a combination of phylloxera and Pierce’s disease and had be replanted, at which time the vines were replaced by red varieties to augment the production of the family’s highly-prized cabernet sauvignon. As Philip Togni recalls when asked about planting merlot, cabernet franc and petit verdot to go along with the cabernet sauvignon, “we always wanted to try and make more elegant and complex wines, and a classic Bordeaux blend made sense, though the two of the first vintages of 1983 and 1985 were unique in that both were produced from one hundred percent cabernet sauvignon.” But, from the outset, the red vineyards up here on the Spring Mountain property have been planted to the same proportions as they are today: eighty-two percent cabernet sauvignon, fifteen percent merlot, two percent cabernet franc and one percent petit verdot. As Philip likes to say, “we planted all of the traditional red wine grapes of Bordeaux when we got up here, with the exception of malbec, which I am glad we skipped, as they are doing such a good job with that varietal down in Argentina these days.”

The first release from the new Philip Togni Vineyard was the 1983 Sauvignon Blanc in the summer of 1984, which was received quite warmly in the market in general, with the Oyster Bar restaurant in Grand Central Terminal in New York early on contracting for a significant percentage of the production of this cuvée to be reserved for their use (complete with a special label), and for many years, if you wanted to drink the Togni family’s white wine in New York, you had to go to the Oyster Bar. While it was nice for the family to have a bit of white wine to drink and sell, particularly in those first couple of years, as the 1983 cabernet sauvignon would spend between two years aging in barrel prior to bottling and release, the intention right from the beginning was to focus almost exclusively on the cabernet-based wines for the estate. As I noted above, Philip Togni Vineyard produced a sauvignon blanc from 1983 through the 1994 vintage, but when the combination of phylloxera and Pierce’s Disease eventually finished off the vines, it was logical that this section of the vineyard would be replanted to cabernet sauvignon and merlot, as there has never been enough Philip Togni Vineyard cabernet sauvignon available for a thirsty market. Today, the winery still only produces about two thousand cases of red wine each vintage, with a small percentage held back to be released as a library selection after ten years of bottle age, and with the wine available in several European and Asian markets, in addition to the United States, it is one of the hardest to find, top flight cabernets produced in California.

From the outset, Philip Togni's focus for his own winery was always going to be on cabernet sauvignon, with the attendant other traditional blending grapes of the Médoc, and (the quality of the sauvignon blanc notwithstanding) it is this wine that has made the fame of this outstanding winery. Beginning with the inaugural vintage of 1983, there was to be no compromise and no following of fashions for the red wine, which was to be classically structured and built for the long haul, with a perfect synthesis of the sturdiness of a Mountain cabernet and the inherent elegance of Philip's wines, first honed way back in 1956 at Château Lascombes. Keep in mind that when the first Philip Togni Vineyard cabernet was released from the 1983 vintage, this was the height of the "food wine movement" in California, and the prevailing winemaking trend of the day was to "sculpt the wine" and rein in some of the inherent power and structure of classic north coast cabernets (probably to make clients drink them faster and accelerate depletions of inventory at the winery level). Philip was to have nothing to do with this short-lived fad, and from the very first vintage, the Togni Vineyard cabernets have been very classically structured and tightly-knit wines that were built for the long haul, and the wines have consistently shown a great ability to age slowly and gracefully. As Philip commented during our vertical tasting here in New York, which was the first one that the family had ever organized of a large number of vintages to be served side by side, "I have been quite content with the relative youth of some of these older vintages, and it looks like just maybe we have succeeded in our original goal of making a wine that would be as long-lived as Calon-Ségur." And there is no question that the wines have stood the test of time beautifully, as the 1983 still retains plenty of vigor and while at its apogee right now, certainly still has another good decade or more of life in it before it even starts to consider looking over the far side of the plateau and beginning a gentle period of decline. The Togni family's wines start out life structured, deep and very pure, with plenty of attendant tannin buried in the fine base of fruit, lovely nascent complexity already in evidence and the impeccable sense of balance and focus that a wine needs to age long and develop multiple layers of complexity with bottle age. In fact, the only ingredient missing upon release for these beautiful cabernets is time, which inexorably will work its eventual magic on each and every vintage and witness these wines becoming some of California's very finest renditions of cabernet sauvignon. Typically, it seems that it takes a good eighteen to twenty years for most top vintages to reach their apogees here at Philip Togni Vineyard, and from what I can tell at this early stage (as remember, the very first vintage is still at its zenith of peak drinking today, at age thirty-one), most top years are destined to last fifty to sixty years in bottle.

I asked Philip how he has been able to remain aloof from so many of the winemaking trends that have engulfed other wineries during his long career- the "sculpted" food wines of the early 1980s, the heavily-oaked and high alcohol wines of the '90s and '00s, and the trend to "work" the wines in the cellar with a variety of additives, detracting techniques (get those unruly fruit tannins out of there, so we can add them back into the blend in perfect form as powdered tannins) and the like over the course of his career, as it is abundantly clear that the winemaking here has remained a beautiful constant since the very first release from the 1983 vintage. He chuckled and said "I guess it is a combination of being a bit slow to pick up on whatever is currently trendy and being a bit stubborn and skeptical by nature, so that a lot of these things just really never appealed to me from the outset." Clearly, he had also already arrived at a very finely honed methodology by the time he opened up his own winery in 1983, and he already had a very good track record of his wines from previous stops aging very well, so there was nothing really



necessary to change when he and Birgitta started producing their own wines in '83. And, he is quick to point out that his wife Birgitta has been every bit as instrumental in the success of their family winery as he has, for she has been in charge of the viticulture here since day one. There is little doubt that another very important factor in defining the Togni Vineyard wines as absolutely classic and unmanipulated stems from his very early training in Bordeaux and that the aesthetic sensibilities that emphasize balance, complexity and elegance were first discovered during his early days working with Alexis Lichine. He has carried this stylistic paradigm with him at each and every stop he has made during his long and illustrious career, and it is quite clear that he has passed on this same appreciation of balance, complexity and refinement to his daughter Lisa Togni, and it is self-evident that the style here is not about to change during her tenure as well.

The Togni Vineyard cabernets are made in a very straightforward and old school style, with the grapes de-stemmed, crushed and then fermented in a fairly fast, hot, ten day fermentation with a neutral, cultured yeast. After fermentation, the wines are racked off into Bordeaux-sized barrels for aging, with forty percent of the barrels new each year and the remainder a blend of one wine and two wine oak. The wines are racked every three months for the period of their *elevage*, which typically runs the course of two to two and a half years, and then they are bottled without any filtration. As Philip notes, "we have never filtered the wines here on Spring Mountain since the first vintage, and we stopped fining them as well after the 1988s." During the period of the *elevage*, there is no distinction made between the casks that will go into the *grand vin* here and which will be reserved for the second wine, the Tanbark Hill bottling, as this is a decision that is taken just prior to bottling. When the *elevage* is nearing completion, Philip and Lisa will taste each and every cask and make their final decisions on which barrels will go into the estate wine and which wines will go into the Tanbark Hill cuvée. As Philip remarks, "the only consideration is whether or not a certain cask has the depth, structure and intensity to last a very long time and make it into the first wine; if the barrel seems likely to not have the depth to age gracefully, it goes into the Tanbark Hill, even though each decision on a barrel is the equivalent of throwing out ten thousand dollars!" He chuckles, "Lisa and I try not to think about it when we are doing the tastings, and I guess we have become a bit inured to it over the years, but with the difference between the price of a bottle of each cuvée fairly significant, it is a lot like throwing out piles of hundred dollar bills when a barrel is consigned to the Tanbark bottling." As the Tanbark Hill cabernet is made by a barrel selection in the cellars right before the *mise*, it too always bears the moniker of "Estate Bottled" proudly on its label, as it is one hundred percent from fruit grown on the family's ten acres of vines on Spring Mountain.

The generational transition at Philip Togni Vineyard has already seamlessly taken place, as Lisa Togni has worked full-time alongside of her father now since the 2000 vintage. Lisa did not study oenology at the university, rather taking a Bachelor's Degree and an MBA in business, but followed up her studies with *stages* in both Bordeaux (Château Leoville-Barton) and Australia prior to returning back to the Spring Mountain family winery in time for the 2000 vintage. As the vertical showed so convincingly, nothing has changed one iota in terms of style or structure in this iconic cabernet blends since Lisa's arrival in 2000, and in fact, one is really struck by how impossible it is to tell any difference whatsoever between the wines made by Philip solely in the earlier decades and those fashioned by the father-daughter Togni team since the start of the new millennium. The vineyards now are also fully through their transitional

phase, as of course the scourge of phylloxera had to be dealt with and the original vineyards planted in 1981 have been grubbed up and replanted on phylloxera-resistant rootstock in the early 1990s. A small parcel of vines planted in 1985 still remain, and these are now the oldest on the family farm. The winery is still remarkably old school, as it is extremely far off the beaten path of today's Napa Valley, as no busloads of tourists tool up here on weekends to party and hit their credit cards to haul back a few bottles, and in fact, the winery still does not have a sign! One winds up onto Spring Mountain and simply sees the address- 3780 Spring Mountain Road- outside of a chain link fence around the property, with the winery buildings and vineyards tucked away out of sight for passing visitors. The Las Vegas-like feel of so much of the valley floor is nowhere to be found at Philip Togni Vineyard, and a visitor immediately has the sense that this is a very serious address where the focus is solely on producing great wines! Visitors on the mailing list are allowed (if not outright encouraged) with a proper appointment, but Philip likes to joke "that every time I hear a car going by on the road, I am happy to think that they are not coming here, so that we can concentrate on our work."



The Tognis have ten and a half acres planted to vines, with all but one hundred and fifty vines planted now dedicated to vineyards for their red wine, with the breakdown eighty-two percent cabernet sauvignon, fifteen percent merlot, two percent cabernet franc and one percent petit verdot. In contrast to the prevailing methodology in Bordeaux these days, the family vinifies all of the grape varieties together, rather than each one separately and then making a blended wine, as they feel this approach allows the different grapes to harmonize faster in the finished wine and adds to elegance when the wine is mature. I asked Lisa Togni if there were more possible vineyard land on their property on Spring Mountain (which is twenty-five acres in total) and she replied "no, the ten and a half acres we currently have planted is the extent of the vineyard land up here." I was curious how the family was able to vinify the merlot with the cabernets, when it is typically a grape variety that will mature a bit sooner than the others. Lisa replied that "we have the merlot planted in the shady corners to offset this." The family harvests block by block when the grapes are ripe- but not overripe- which will usually mean picking begins for the red wine varieties towards the last week in September. However, there can be exceptions to this in years like 2011, when rains in September played havoc with typical Napa picking schedules, but Philip and Lisa simply waited for the vineyards to dry out again and ripening to recommence, picking at the end of October and harvesting grapes at their customary ripeness levels.

As I mentioned above, up until the 1994 vintage, the estate produced their only white wine, a sauvignon blanc. At the outset of planting back in 1981, Philip and Birgitta Togni had committed three acres of their vineyard land to this variety, so it was not an insignificant wine in their initial portfolio. Back in the day when this wine was produced at the winery, it would be fermented and aged in stainless steel and bottled after three months of *elevage*. I have not tasted

an example for many years, but recall it fondly from my old days in the wine trade and I am sure that the folks at the Oyster Bar at Grand Central Terminal miss it mightily. The vineyards dedicated to sauvignon blanc were replanted over the course of three years, from 1992 to 1994, as phylloxera and Pierce's Disease took their toll, and they were replaced by cabernet sauvignon and merlot. The other grape variety that was planted back in 1981 and remains on the property today is the extremely rare Black Hamburg grape, which Philip and Lisa use to make their exquisite dessert wine, called Ca' Togni. The family only produces about a barrel of this wine each year, which amounts to five hundred half bottles. The first vintage ever commercially released was the 1985. It is made in homage to the great South African dessert wine of the nineteenth century, Constantia, and is a fortified wine that typically will finish off at between thirteen and a half and fourteen percent alcohol once it has had its spirit added. It is a beautifully floral and aromatic wine of far greater delicacy than the vast majority of fortified wines produced today and is really a very unique and beautiful wine. I have no idea how well it ages, but imagine, like all Togni Vineyard wines, it would have no problems cruising along in the cellars for many, many years.

As the tasting notes below will attest, Philip Togni has produced one of the greatest examples of cabernet sauvignon-based wine since he has opened the doors of the family winery back in 1983. The wines always start out life in a very structured manner, though never with the same powerful "Mountain Cabernet" personalities of wines such as the examples from folks like Bob Travers at Mayacamas or Al Brounstein at Diamond Creek back in the day, or of Randy Dunn today, as the wines always tend to be a bit more suavely put together out of the blocks and a bit less obviously bound up in their structural elements. That said, they are every bit as ageworthy as those fine wines and also every bit as reticent in their youth, despite their tannins being a bit better buried in the young wine and the overall impression out of the blocks of a less muscular wine. Based upon our vertical tasting in May of this year, it strikes me as absolutely foolhardy to open any vintage of the *grand vin* here prior to its passing its fifteenth birthday, and in reality, twenty years of age is really better to start drinking any of the cabernet-based wines from Philip Togni Vineyard. Even a wine like the brilliant 1996 is only just starting to hit on all cylinders at age eighteen, and it will still continue to improve and further soften over the next decade, so there is no reason to rush drinking any of these wines prior to their twentieth birthdays. In fact, this is what the Tanbark Hill bottling is for- to drink on the younger side- as this wine is simply a selection of barrels that are deemed likely to start to drink much sooner and not have the requisite structure for long aging! I hope the notes will also demonstrate how amazingly consistent the superb quality of this wine has been over the years, as other than a few of the cooler vintages (such as 1998), they are really rather remarkably homogenous in quality, though they do show the iterations of varying vintage characteristics. As Philip and Lisa both noted, "we almost never open several different vintages at one time, as other than a few of the more difficult years, they all tend to age quite similarly, and consequently, this is the first time we have ever done such an extensive vertical of our wines."

The Philip Togni Winery remains very much a family affair, with the winery having only two full-time employees beyond Philip, Birgitta and Lisa Togni. There are additionally two part-time employees and one gets the sense that personnel change here happens as slowly as their superb cabernets unfold with bottle age. The winery is built into the hillside, and now- one of the changes since Lisa returned full-time- it is one hundred percent solar-powered. With rackings for

the red wines done every three months (amounting to six or seven for each vintage prior to bottling), father and daughter and the two full-time employees can be kept pretty busy in the cellars. The bottling is done on premise with a small bottling line, and Philip Togni has used barrels from the same *tonnelier* since the 1970s, so one gets the sense when visiting the property on Spring Mountain of a well-oiled and smooth-running machine, where all of the glitches were long, long ago worked out to everyone's complete satisfaction. It is quiet up here in this corner of Spring Mountain, and Napa Valley in all its current glitz and tourist trade veneer seems a million miles away, and one gets the sense that this is exactly how the Togni family likes it. I asked Philip if he would like to comment on any of the current trends (that perhaps are happily starting to fade out?) in the realm of Napa cabernet sauvignon, such as very high alcohol wines, heavy cellar manipulation with the use of things like extraction enzymes, Mega-Purple, powdered tannins and the like, and he politely declined. His daughter Lisa laughed that "he had never even heard of Mega-Purple" and she continued, "we have always believed in simplicity-well-cultivated grapes in the right soil, plus the best possible barrel appears to be our only 'secret' - plus low yields and a lot of thought and experience."

Philip Togni's remarkable career has now spanned sixty harvests. Looking back, it is hard to imagine California wine's history without this seminal figure quietly working in the background at so many legendary locations along the way, until he and Birgitta had finally cut down enough trees and cleared enough stones to start putting in vines up on Spring Mountain in the spring of 1981. When you have a chance to drink a bottle of great Mayacamas cabernet from the decade of the 1970s, keep in mind that the vines were probably planted by Philip Togni back in 1959! Or, if you come across one of those great old Chalone bottlings from the '70s or early '80s, prior to the property being sold off and going corporate, recall that the first commercial wines ever produced here (I am sure that not that many bottles were ever actually sold back then!) were made by Philip Togni. With his winemaking roots firmly in Bordeaux, or more specifically, Margaux, Philip has played a massive role in the unfolding of California wine history over the last fifty-five years, and characteristically, he has done much of the heavy lifting quietly in the background, while others were far more content to take the limelight. But, this is the man, now still hale and hearty in his eighty-seventh year, with his signature, closely-trimmed white beard, his scholarly demeanor and his still gently-inflected, British accent. As Lisa Togni likes to say, "I do not think that my father will ever really retire, as this is what he loves to do." He has very quietly left a singularly towering legacy over the course of his career, and as the vertical tasting of his family's superb red wine will attest, there will be no rush to pull corks on a great many of the wines that he has produced up on Spring Mountain since 1983, as they continue to age with a patience in the bottle that fully befits their maker and his career-long penchant for taking the long view and the high road.

*The notes on the 2009 and 2007 estate cabernets, as well as the 2007 Tanbark Hill bottling and the 2004 Ca' Togni all hail from my visit to the estate in June of 2011, and I have reprinted them here for the sake of completeness in the article. All the rest of the wines were tasted here in New York in May, at the remarkable vertical tasting generously organized by Philip and Lisa Togni, in conjunction with their New York distributor, David Bowler, or from a few bottles pulled from a friend's cellar in the aftermath of that historic tasting.*

### ***Cabernet Sauvignon “Tanbark Hill”***

*The Tanbark Hill second wine has been produced at Philip Togni Vineyard since the 1985 vintage, so there was no second wine made here in the first two inaugural vintages. In many years, this will end up being one hundred percent cabernet sauvignon. It is philosophically a barrel selection, which is made right at the end of the elevage and prior to bottling, but as the Tognis pick block by block and ferment each parcel of vines together, it can also be primarily based on certain plots of vines (perhaps younger?) or shadier sections of the vignoble. It really is a terrific wine, that not surprisingly shares a lot of the black fruity complexity and refinement found in the Grand Vin here, but it is always a fairly accessible wine right out of the blocks and does not demand bottle age before it can be enjoyed.*

### **2011 Cabernet Sauvignon “Tanbark Hill”- Philip Togni Vineyard**

The 2011 Tanbark Hill shows off the fine quality of this strong vintage, offering up a deep and black fruity nose of dark berries, black cherries, a bit of chicory, cigar ash and a topnote of tobacco leaf. On the palate the wine is medium-full, complex and already quite accessible, with a fine core of fruit, modest tannins and a long, tangy and quite classy finish. This is a lovely vintage of Tanbark Hill, and though I know this wine is crafted for earlier drinking, I am sure this has the requisite balance to age quite well and it would be fun to taste a wine like this a decade down the road. 2014-2025+. **88.**

### **2007 Cabernet Sauvignon “Tanbark Hill”- Philip Togni Vineyard**

The Tanbark Hill bottling is made for slightly earlier consumption than the estate bottled cabernet sauvignon, and consequently it is selected from some of the more forward lots in the cellar. The 2007 shows a touch more ripe accessibility on the nose, jumping from the glass in a blend of cassis, dark chocolate, cigar smoke, a touch of fresh herbs and a whisper of new oak. On the palate the wine is broad-shouldered, full and quite tasty on the attack, with good mid-palate depth, moderate tannins and very good length and grip on the finish. Good juice. 2011-2025. **89+.**

### ***Cabernet Sauvignon- Philip Togni Vineyard***

#### **2011 Cabernet Sauvignon- Philip Togni Vineyard**

While 2011 is generally a cooler year in northern California, Lisa and Philip Togni noted that they had essentially the same ripeness level in this vintage as they normally have, as the wine came in a bit under fourteen percent in alcohol. They achieved this by waiting until the very end of October and simply waiting through the rain that rolled through Napa in late September. The wine has turned out very well indeed, offering up a deep and cooler fruit nose of cassis, a youthful touch of bell pepper, tobacco leaf, a lovely base of soil, currant leaf and a deft framing of toasty oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite tightly-knit out of the blocks, with a fine core, ripe tannins, lovely focus and balance and a very long, promising finish. This will be lovely, but give it its customary fifteen to twenty years in the cellar to start to stir from slumber. 2025-2060+. **92+.**

#### **2010 Cabernet Sauvignon- Philip Togni Vineyard**

The 2010 Cabernet from the Togni family is outstanding, with a bit more early intensity than is evident in the more tightly-knit 2011 version. The mountain cabernet roots of this wine are quite evident in its fine and still quite primary bouquet of cassis, dark berries, stony soil tones, cigar smoke, tobacco leaf and a nice framing of new wood. On the palate the wine is deep,

full-bodied and nascently complex, with a rock solid core of fruit, ripe, chewy tannins, lovely delineation and balance and a very long, youthful and superb finish. This will be an excellent vintage for this bottling. 2025-2075. **93+**.

#### **2009 Cabernet Sauvignon- Philip Togni Vineyard**

The 2009 Togni cabernet sauvignon is showing superb potential out of barrel, as it offers up a deep, complex and classy bouquet of dark berries, cassis, cigar smoke, a touch of youthful bell pepper, a hint of tar, lovely soil tones and a refined base of new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and strikingly pure on the attack, with a fine mid-palate depth, superb balance, ripe tannins and a very classy profile on the very long, youthful finish. This will be a superb bottle in the fullness of time. 2020-2060+. **94+**.

#### **2008 Cabernet Sauvignon- Philip Togni Vineyard**

Of the most recent vintages of this wine that I have tasted, the 2008 is my favorite and I believe this is destined to be one of the absolute classic turned out from this excellent Spring Mountain property. The deep and very pure nose wafts from the glass in a superb blend of dark berries, cigar smoke, currant leaf, dark soil tones, a touch of menthol and a fine framing of smoky new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and really refined on the attack, with a rock solid core, firm, chewy tannins and a great sense of refinement on the very, very long, primary and suave finish. This is very early days for this wine (it is after all, a young Togni cabernet!), but it will eventually be extremely polished and vibrant and should eventually rank right up there with the very finest vintages produced at this property, such as the 1996 and 1991. 2028-2075+. **95**.

#### **2007 Cabernet Sauvignon- Philip Togni Vineyard**

The 2007 Togni cabernet sauvignon possesses a lovely sappiness on both the nose and palate that is very exciting indeed. The complex and very classy nose offers up a mélange of black cherries, dark berries, tobacco leaf, smoke, a touch of bell pepper, a fine base of soil and again, a very measured framing of new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and strikingly sappy at the core, with great focus and purity, substantial, but quite ripe tannins, good acidity and superb balance on the very long and classy finish. A terrific young wine. 2020-2060+. **95**.

#### **2005 Cabernet Sauvignon- Philip Togni Vineyard**

The 2005 is another outstanding vintage for Philip and Lisa Togni, and I love the very sophisticated structural chassis of this pure and very intense young wine. The outstanding bouquet offers up an aromatic constellation of cassis, a touch of bell pepper, cigar smoke, dark soil tones, a bit of dried eucalyptus and a discreet base of new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and very suave on the attack, with superb mid-palate concentration, ripe, buried tannins, very good acidity and a long, nascently complex and very elegant finish. This will be outstanding and give the superb 2008 a run for its money for many, many decades. 2020-2065+. **94+**.

#### **2004 Cabernet Sauvignon- Philip Togni Vineyard**

At first sniff, the 2004 Togni cabernet seems a bit tarry and less promising than wines such as the 2008 and 2005 that preceded this in our vertical. However, with a bit of air, this wine really opens up and closes the gap considerably with those superb wines. The bouquet is a fine blend of dark berries, cigar ash, stony soil tones, a touch of woodsmoke, a bit of the aforementioned tariness, currant leaf and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and shows a bit more of its mountain roots in its structure, with a fine core, firm, chewy



tannins, excellent focus and grip and a very long, primary and promising finish. Another exceptional wine in the making. 2024-2075. **94.**

### **2003 Cabernet Sauvignon- Philip Togni Vineyard**

The 2003 Togni cabernet is a bit more aligned with the very suave personality of the 2005, rather than the more structured style of the 2004, and it is going to be another absolutely stellar bottle of wine in the fullness of time. The outstanding nose delivers scents of dark berries, cassis, currant leaf, a fine base of dark soil tones, dried eucalyptus, a touch of espresso and a gentle framing of toasty oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and simply beautiful in its balance, with a vibrant core of fruit, ripe, seamlessly integrated tannins and outstanding length and grip on the focused and classy finish. A beautiful bottle. 2023-2065+. **94+.**

### **2000 Cabernet Sauvignon- Philip Togni Vineyard**

The 2000 was the first vintage where Lisa Togni returned to the winery full-time to work alongside of her father, and they have made a wonderful inaugural vintage of their partnership in the cellars! The outstanding bouquet offers up a cool fruit blend of dark berries, a bit of *garrigue*, incipient notes of chipotle peppers, dried eucalyptus, a beautifully complex base of soil, a bit of cedar and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, complex and shows off superb mid-palate depth, with moderate, but still chewy tannins, lovely focus and grip and a very long, still youthful finish that wants another six to eight years of bottle age before it really starts to show some generosity. But this will be a complete and very classy wine at its apogee. 2020-2055. **93.**

### **1998 Cabernet Sauvignon- Philip Togni Vineyard**

1998 was another cool year- similar to 2011 notes Lisa Togni- and the wine is just a touch high-toned as a result in comparison to more complete vintages from this decade such as the 1996. The bouquet is deep, black fruity and quite complex in its blend of dark berries, cassis, lovely soil tones, hints of the chipotles to come, still a bit of residual bell pepper, gentle tariness and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and shows off a good core, with a slightly tarry personality, melting tannins and a long, complex and low fat finish. Not a great vintage for this excellent bottling, but a very fine example of a 1998 north coast cabernet. As Philip Togni notes, “it lacks just a bit of the bass notes of a top vintage.” 2016-2040. **91.**

### **1997 Cabernet Sauvignon- Philip Togni Vineyard**

The 1997 cabernet sauvignon from Philip Togni is one of my absolute favorites from him in the decade of the 1990s. The bouquet is really starting to blossom and show a great core of blossoming mountain fruit, as it delivers a fine blend of sweet cassis and black cherries, tobacco leaf, just a whisper of the chipotles to come, cigar smoke, fresh herbs, dark soil tones, a bit of currant leaf and a deft framing of new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and beautifully balanced, with a rock solid core, ripe, resolving tannins and great grip on the very long and perfectly poised finish. Great juice that is still a few years away from its apogee. 2019-2050. **95.**

### **1996 Cabernet Sauvignon- Philip Togni Vineyard**

The 1996 vintage *chez* Togni is really outstanding and at age eighteen, this wine is really starting to drink brilliantly. The stunning bouquet soars from the glass in a mélange of sweet cassis, black cherries, a touch of mint, dark soil tones, cigar ash and incipient notes of the chipotle peppers that will be more pronounced with further bottle age. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and now quite wide open, with a great core of vibrant fruit, superb soil signature, melting tannins, lovely acids and outstanding length and grip on the beautifully

balanced and very, very classy finish. One of my absolute favorite vintages of this wine in the decade of the 1990s! It is just starting to reach its apogee and is drinking with great style at age eighteen, but it is in essence still a young wine and it will be even better to drink a decade down the road. 2014-2040+. **95.**

#### **1995 Cabernet Sauvignon- Philip Togni Vineyard**

The 1995 Togni cabernet sauvignon is not as far down its evolutionary path as the stunning 1996, and this is still pretty hunkered down behind its chewy, mountain cabernet veneer. The bouquet is a pretty reserved blend of cassis, a bit of tariness, still some residual bell pepper, cigar smoke dark soil and a gentle topnote of fresh herbs. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and closed, with a very good core, still some substantial, chewy tannins and a very long, focused and youthful finish. This vintage is quite shut down at the present time, so maybe I am just being a bit pessimistic, but it seems possible that the 1995 may always be just a touch muscle-bound in personality. But, to be fair, I may be misjudging it a bit in its closed down phase. 2020-2050. **90+?**

#### **1991 Cabernet Sauvignon- Philip Togni Vineyard**

If one presses Philip Togni to pick a favorite vintage at his Spring Mountain property since the first release in the 1983 vintage, the 1991 is the one that he chooses. And, it is easy to see why, as this youthful wine has all of the constituent components for future greatness on both the nose and palate. The bouquet is still on the young side, offering up notes of cassis, black cherries, cigar smoke, just a touch of incipient chipotles, stony soil tones, a bit of remaining bell pepper and tobacco leaf. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and bottomless at the core, with firm, ripe tannins, excellent focus and grip, great intensity of flavor and a very long, youthful and promising finish. This will be absolutely stellar, but give it at least another six to ten years' worth of bottle age! 2022-2075. **95+.**

#### **1983 Cabernet Sauvignon- Philip Togni Vineyard**

This was the first vintage ever released from the Spring Mountain property (following on the release of both a 1983 and 1984 Sauvignon Blanc from the Togni family) and it is a very rare vintage at the estate, having been fashioned entirely from cabernet sauvignon, rather than as a blend. The wine is really outstanding and a superb example of this rather difficult vintage, as it offers up scents of cassis, black cherries, cigar smoke, dark soil tones, a nice touch of turmeric-like spice tones, dried eucalyptus and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and at its apogee with still a touch of the vintage's tannins perking up the long finish, fine focus and complexity and very good depth in the mid-palate. This is a lovely drink and one of the best 1983 cabernets I have tasted in a very long time. 2014-2025. **91.**

#### ***Other Philip Togni Vineyard Wines (as well as previous stops along the way)***

##### **2007 Ca' Togni- Philip Togni Vineyard**

The 2007 Ca' Togni is a lovely wine that finished off at 13.9 percent alcohol and shows its customary floral aspects on the nose and wonderful vinosity on the palate. The bouquet is a superb blend of black raspberries, blood orange, violets, chocolate and rose petals. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish, pure and succulent on the attack, with a fine core, lovely focus and balance and a long, classy and utterly charming finish. A beautiful and utterly singular wine. 2014-2025. **91.**

##### **2004 Ca' Togni- Philip Togni Vineyard**

The 2004 Ca' Togni is the current release of this lovely dessert wine. The wine is fourteen percent alcohol, with this reached by very late harvesting of the grapes and then

arresting the fermentation after only a few percentage points by adding grape neutral spirits. The 2004 offers up a really beautiful, musky nose of desiccated peaches and cherries, a touch of apricot, pungent floral tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, pure and plenty sweet, with lovely focus, nice balancing acidity to keep it light on its feet and a very long, focused finish. Really a lovely and very unique dessert wine. 2011-2020+. **93.**



### **1975 Cabernet Sauvignon- Cuvaizon (served from magnum)**

This is one of Philip Togni's favorite vintages of cabernet sauvignon that he crafted during his tenure at Cuvaizon, but as he notes, "it is probably a bit bretty and shows we really did not know as much as we thought we did back in those days." The wine, despite its touch of brett, is still quite enjoyable on both the nose and palate, offering up a deep bouquet of sweet dark berries, cassis, cigar ash a touch of violet, saddle leather and dark soil. On the palate the wine is medium-full, complex and still quite vibrant, with a good core of fruit, a very elegant profile (particularly for a 1975 cabernet, which these days, tend to be the most powerful vintage from the decade of the 1970s), melted tannins and a very long finish that closes with fine grip and plenty of life still in it. A good bottle- though one's enjoyment will be tempered just a bit by one's tolerance for a bit of brett. 2014-2025. **89.**

### **1975 Zinfandel- Cuvaision**

In contrast to the 1975 cabernet, which is not entirely clean, the 1975 Cuvaision Zinfandel is absolutely *à point* and is drinking with great beauty and resolution. The wine is only 12.3 percent alcohol, which is probably the reason that it is still so enjoyable at nearly forty years of age, as it is a perfectly balanced and very complex middleweight that belies today's fantasy that zinfandel will not age gracefully. The bouquet is deep, complex and vibrant in its mélange of desiccated raspberries, red currants, beautiful spice tones redolent of cardamom and cloves, sweet cigar wrapper and soil. On the palate the wine is medium-full, pure and beautifully balanced, with a lovely core of fruit, just a whisper of remaining tannin, a fine core of sweet fruit and lovely focus and grip on the long and complex finish. This was my second of two bottles I bought at auction a couple of years ago, and both were excellent. Just a lovely bottle of old zinfandel with plenty of life still in it. 2014-2025. **91.**

**RECENTLY TASTED SPANISH WINES:  
GREAT TRADITIONAL WINES, A FEW OVERLY ALCOHOLIC DINOSAURS  
AND MORE OLD RIOJA NOTES THAN ANYONE HAS A RIGHT TO TASTE**



*One of the vineyards of Bodegas Pedro Peciña in La Rioja Alta in early summer.*

This report on Spanish wines has been a couple of years in the making, and is long overdue, as I drink and cellar a fair bit of traditionally-styled Spanish wines these days and would like to find time to write about them more often. In particular, I should write more often about the beautiful sparkling wines being produced these days from the small, estate-bottling producers of Cava, as to my mind, after Champagne, these are the greatest sparkling wines in the world and far more interesting and serious than the vast, vast majority of Prosecco out there on the market these days. But, this is one of the mysteries of the world of wine, as Prosecco can often cost a bit more than Cava, and the vast, vast majority is not even fermented in the bottle by the traditional Champagne methods, but has its sparkle added in stainless steel tanks by the Charmat bulk process (that really is most reminiscent of making soda), and yet it sells far more than high quality Cava at the same price point. Of course, when I speak of high-quality Spanish Cava, I am talking primarily about the producers who belong to my “Six Percent Club”- growing their own grapes and producing their own wines exclusively from what they grow. There is such a vast “bulk” market for Cava, with enormous houses buying grapes seemingly from anywhere and doing their best to put a good face on the enormous variations of quality of what they buy, that it is understandable that a great many wine drinkers here the word Cava and think Cordon Negro and turn their attention elsewhere for non-Champagne sparklers. But, for the small houses

that make wines from their own grapes, the quality is extremely high for a great many of these wines, and one can seriously argue that they are amongst the greatest wine values to be found to there in the world of wine today. So, it pays to focus a bit on the folks in the Six Percent Club, who are really making stellar wines at the present time and still offer up, by and large, extremely low prices for what are hand-crafted sparkling wines of great personality and soil complexities.

However, this feature is not focused primarily on Cava, as I have tasted a large number of Spanish wines in the last two years, and find that there are a very large number of great wines currently out on the market- both young vintage and great old wines from some of the specialty retailers and auction houses that are alive to the great possibilities of old Spanish wines- and I really should have gotten around to finding room in one of the recent past issues for the publication of these notes. Spain continues to be one of the “happy hunting grounds” for lovers of traditional wines- red, white, Rosado or sparkling- but, this does not mean that the Spanish wine industry as a whole is really in tune with the predilections of old school palates such as myself, and there continues to be an ocean of overripe, over-oaked and alcoholic wines still produced across the entire Iberian peninsula, so one has to carefully pick and choose to find the real wines amongst the modern vinous detritus. I was rather surprised in preparation for this piece to get some of those “over the top” wines for review- even after explicitly saying that it would be a waste of samples to send wines of that *genre* over to my office- and I had a couple of days with a nasty headache from tasting and spitting a pile of high alcohol wines, as at 14.5 or 15 percent octane, the alcohol can get you even when you are spitting! But, by now, most importers know what is going to curry favor at View From the Cellar and do not waste bottles of jam juice on me, so the vast, vast majority of the wines reported on below are very much worthy of your consideration. I find that I drink a particularly large percentage of my Spanish wines in the cellar during the summer months, as I find the flavors and aesthetic sensibilities of these “old school” Spanish wines in my cellar really work well with the warmer weather. I suppose this makes sense when one considers how warm the Iberian peninsula is much of the year, and I really like to drink these wines as the heat of the day breaks, the sun starts to disappear behind the horizon and the grill is just starting to glow.

There are a number of very, very exciting trends starting to really take root in the wine world of Spain, and while the majority of the market (both domestic and for export) continues to be stuck in the past of high octane, modern-inspired wines, things are starting to stir across vast swaths of vineyard land in Spain and one can now drink amazingly well in a great many regions of the country. Obviously, one of the most important new regions is Ribera Sacra and the beautiful reds produced from old vine Mencía here, though this region can also produce some lovely white wine as well. Several of the wealthy, modernist producers have taken note of the recent success of Ribera Sacra and have arrived in the region, so we may soon start to see some over the top and grotesque renditions of Mencía in the not too distant future (perhaps they are already out there?), but this still remains one of the finest regions for svelte, transparent reds that drink very well at the table and show great potential to age as well. One of my great desires in the not too distant future is to organize a trip to Ribera Sacra and hopefully put together a few vertical tastings of Mencía at some of my favorite producers, as I would really like to see firsthand how these wines evolve with some extended bottle age. My gut feeling is that they will age superbly well, and I would love to have some corroboration in my glass for a week or so, just to get some idea how the bottles in my cellar are going to evolve in the future.



In the neighboring regions of Ribeiro, Valdeorras and Bierzo, things are also very interesting at the present time, and one can find some very good examples of Mencía here as well, but my distinct impression that both Ribeiro and Bierzo are at least as interesting right now for their lovely and racy white wines. Amongst the most interesting of the white wine varieties being grown and either bottled on its own or used in blends is Godello, which is clearly one of Spain's greatest white wine grapes. Ribera Sacra also has some very good examples of Godello out there from some top producers, and this is one of the most interesting dry white wines being produced in the world these days. Given that so many of my favorite dry white wines from around the globe have fallen under the long shadow of premature oxidation, I find that I cellar and drink more dry whites from grapes such as Godello and the like than I did even four or five years ago, as (at least to my palate) they offer up more interesting early drinking than great white Burgundies, white Bordeaux or Alsace wines do in their own collective youths. These latter wines have always struck me as needing the added element of time in bottle to really unlock their inner beauties, and while great Godello seems to show every likelihood of ageworthiness, bottle age is not a prerequisite to great enjoyment of these wines. While I have tasted some lovely white wines from other regions of Spain, I find that I look to these regions and nearby Galicia for most of my Spanish white wine needs these days.

In the aforementioned Galicia, some utterly stupendous wines are being produced these days, from some small growers who have dedicated themselves to removing the shackles of industrial-grade production techniques and extremely high yields from the great Albariño grape, and they are collectively making some of the most stunning dry white wines to be found from anywhere in the world. Most of these estates are necessarily small and their production levels make them rather scattered around the world's wine markets, but they are truly special wines and very much worth a special search to find. I discuss them in greater detail below. The beauty these days of Spain's dry Rosés is quite well-known, and as Rosé in general has gotten more popular, so have the top examples from the Iberian Peninsula. I did not taste a lot of examples of Rosado for this report, but I did cross paths with a few gems that are reported on below. In the world of red wines from Spain, there is a lot to like below the still tidal wave quantities of very ripe and alcoholic reds, which remain extremely popular within Spain itself, and which seem unlikely to disappear anytime soon. So one has to be choosy when it comes to red wines, which is a bit bizarre, given that this country has long been known best for the quality of its red wines. But, if one is willing to keep a close eye on the purported octane level on the labels (I did cross paths with several reds that claimed 13.5 or fourteen percent alcohol on the labels, but were clearly much higher!), one can usually be reasonably assured to get a pretty interesting wine if the alcohol is fourteen percent or lower. The Spanish palate has loved oaky wines for a very long time, so one again, has to be a bit picky, as some of this traditional fondness for oaky flavors and aromatics has been moved from the old school of "toasted coconut" American oak to the more aggressive spice tones of cedar and *pain épice* of French new wood. Some producers use their French wood with discretion, understanding that it will mark the wines far more than the older American oak of yesteryear, while others seem truly enamored of sucking toothpicks when they drink their wines. But, if one is careful, there are plenty of options out there.

I wrote a lot about the lovely wines of Cataluña after my last visit there a couple of years ago, and I continue to like a lot of what I am tasting from this far flung region. The myriad of

great *terroirs* in Cataluña is truly remarkable, and the more that winemakers here focus on guarding the minerality in their wines, the more success they will have on the international market. But, Cataluña is a very hot region and it is easy to produce ripe, buxom wines if one is not careful, as a recent dinner of wines from this region clearly demonstrated. After a stellar lineup of Cava (as Cataluña produces fully ninety-eight percent of all of Spain's Cava, though the DO of Cava is not geographically limited to Cataluña), we were presented with several top cuvées of the region's red wines from producers who I have generally liked very well in the past. But, as they were looking to impress, they went for their biggest, boldest bottlings, and the results were less interesting than they could have been. But, a cache of samples of Catalàn reds that were sent to me last year and are reported on below were much more restrained in style and showed off just how much potential there is for red wines in this lovely region. Priorat remains the most famous DO in the region of Cataluña, but these sun-baked wines from the crumbling slate mountain sides in the region remain some of the least interesting wines in all of Spain to my palate, and I think the music is playing for red wines in other parts of Cataluña. There are also some fine white wines being produced in Cataluña, but I only tasted a small handful of samples of these in preparation for this report.

In the most famous red wine regions of Spain, Ribera del Duero and Rioja, there remain some truly outstanding, old school producers in both, but the heavy boot print of modern, higher octane and oaky wines remains quite prevalent in both regions. Perhaps the winds of change that have begun to shake up some of the like-minded practitioners of over the top wines in California in the last year or two may blow their way east and shake the branches in Ribera del Duero and Rioja in the years to come and we can go back to the days when us traditionalists looked first and foremost to these two regions for the greatest red wines of Spain. However, that said, probably half of this report is dedicated to the wines of Rioja, for there may well be an over-abundance of modern and rigidly French oaky wines being made here today, but I have had the good fortune over the last two years to drink an embarrassment of riches of old Rioja from the days when classicism ruled the roost here. For many of these notes, I am indebted to Mannie Berk of the Rare Wine Company, who has turned his focus to these old school classics in the last several years and been able to discover a great many old cellars of traditional Rioja and brought these wines over to the US market to find happier homes. I think I participated in two or three tastings of old Rioja with Mannie since my last report on Spain appeared in these pages, and I thank him for thinking of me for these events. A New York-based collector and wine trade member, Brad Kane, also was kind enough to invite me to a big tasting of 1964 Rioja that he organized this past June, and this further allowed me to augment my already deep notes on older vintages from this region. Sadly, both our bottles of 1964 La Rioja Alta "904" and "890" were corked at this tasting, which I had never had an opportunity to taste previously, but so many other remarkable bottles of 1964 were opened on this occasion, that it was not really painful at all to miss out on those wines! As I have a big, historical feature in the works on the great Rioja estate of Cuné, most of the recent bottles of their older wines that I have tasted are not reported upon here, but will be found in that upcoming article. However, as I do drink an awful lot of Cuné wines, I have included notes on a small handful of the older bottles here (as what would a feature on Spanish wines be without some Cuné notes), as well as all the recent releases that their New York importer sent me this spring.

This article will also feature recent notes on one of the US's most exciting Spanish importers, the Spanish Artisan Wine Group, run by long-time Spanish wine and food expert, Gerry Dawes. I wrote about his superb portfolio of producers in a special feature about two years ago. In the interim, Gerry has split with his original capital partner in the business and reformed the company, with a break of about six or seven months in the market, so a great many of his wines have not been available here in the states for a while now. However, as he has containers getting ready to roll with his new investors, which should arrive here in New York in early September, I thought it might be interesting to revisit some of his wines from the previous vintages. Gerry very kindly offered to open up some of his last bottles of his producers' wines from his own cellar, so we could see how these were evolving with a bit of bottle age. The wines showed almost uniformly well at our tasting, with only one wine fading a bit (how long can one expect Rosado to age in any case?), and I am very excited about tasting the new vintages from his outstanding portfolio of traditionalists when they arrive in the autumn. I was also fortunate to catch up with another of my favorite Spanish wine importer's current lineup, José Pastor, who has found some absolutely stellar estates over the course of his short career in the importing business. The notes that follow are arranged primarily by geography, with the exception that I have grouped all of the Cava and Rosado in their own "wine type" section at the start of the tasting notes. After that, the regions are covered from north to south and west to east (to the best of my abilities). Within each geographical subsection, wines are listed by vintage, from youngest to oldest, and the alphabetically by each producer in the vintage sections. I have saved Rioja for the last section of tasting notes, as this is the place of honor, and given the honor roll of great Rioja I have had the great good fortune to taste in the last year or so, it seemed that the Rioja notes should complete this feature on Spanish wines. Think of it as the big crescendo in the last movement of the symphony, or saving the biggest Christmas present to open last when you were a kid.

### ***Cava***

#### **Bohigas Brut Reserva NV (Penedès)**

The Bohigas Brut Reserva is made from a mix of fifty percent Xarel-lo, thirty percent Macabeu and twenty percent Parellada and aged in the cellars for twenty-four months on the fine lees prior to disgorgement. The wine is really quite lovely, wafting from the glass in a mix of peach, lemon, Catalàn soil tones, dried flowers and gentle smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, nicely complex and quite zesty in personality,, with frothy *mousse* and quite good length and grip on the focused finish. This is very good Cava and a superb value. 2014-2020+. **88.**

#### **Bohigas Brut Nature Gran Reserva NV (Penedès)**

The Bohigas Brut Nature Gran Reserva is comprised of a blend of the "big three" (Macabeu, Xarel-lo and Parellada) and a bit of Chardonnay. The current release offers up a superb nose of grapefruit, quinine, complex, stony minerality, menthol, lime peel and a topnote of ocean breeze. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and wonderfully mineral, with a superb core of fruit, bright, well-integrated acids, frothy *mousse*, and fine length and grip on the complex and classy finish. Good juice. 2014-2020. **91.**

#### **Bohigas Brut Rosat NV (Penedès)**

The Bohigas Brut Rosat has a lovely, cherry red color that really looks striking in the flute. The wine is made from a mix of ninety percent Trepát and ten percent pinot noir and is aged on the lees for nine to twelve months before disgorging. The wine offers up a beautiful nose

of blood orange, cinnamon stick, stony minerality, raspberries, smoke and rye bread. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and solid at the core, with elegant *mousse*, good acidity and very nice length and grip on the bouncy finish. A lovely example. 2014-2020. **88.**

**Casa del Mar Brut Blanc de Blancs NV (Penedès)**

The Casa del Mar Brut Blanc de Blancs is made from the traditional blend of the “big three” of Macabeu, Xarel-lo and Perelada and is aged for twenty-two months on its lees prior to disgorgement. The wine offers up a bright and youthful nose of lemon, tart pear, menthol, white soil tones and ocean breeze. On the palate the wine is medium-full, crisp and young, with a fine core, frothy *mousse* and excellent length and grip on the complex finish. I would love to have seen this wine get another six months of aging, but in its zesty youthful stage, it is really beautifully balanced and drinking very well. Good juice and a fine value. 2014-2020. **90.**

**Casa del Mar Brut Rosé NV (Penedès)**

I could not find out the *cépages* on the internet of the Casa del Mar non-vintage Brut Rosé, and in the flurry of samples that arrived for this issue, I could not for the life of me remember who had sent me this Cava sample! In any case, the wine has a beautiful cherry red color and offers up a bright and vibrant nose of blood orange, pomegranate, salty soil tones, a bit of bread dough and rose petals. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, young and snappy, with a good core, slightly coarse bubbles, a fine core of fruit and lovely length and grip on the zesty finish. This is good juice. 2014-2018. **89.**

**Vilarnau Brut Rosé NV (Penedès)**

The Vilarnau Brut Rosé is a blend of ninety percent Trepát and ten percent Pinot Noir and does not undergo malolactic fermentation. Typically, this wine is made up of a single vintage, but I did not spot this information on the label at the tasting I attended where it was served, but I would guess that this is a base year of 2012. The wine is quite pretty, offering up a bright and spicy nose of cherry, blood orange, salty soil tones, citrus peel and a topnote of cinnamon stick. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and nicely complex, with a good core, frothy *mousse* and very good length and grip on the vibrant finish. Vilarnau has been owned by the Sherry house of Gonzales Byass since 1982, and under their auspices, they have grown to become the eighth largest Cava producer in Spain, so they are really a bit big to be included in the “Six Percent Club”, but their wines are always well-made and offer up good value. Good juice. 2014-2018. **88.**

**2010 Suriol Brut Nature Reserva (Penedès)**

The 2010 Suriol Brut Nature Reserva is made up of a blend of forty percent Macabeu and thirty percent each of Parellada and Xarel-lo, all from the Suriol family’s own vineyards. The wine is excellent on both the nose and palate, offering up a bright and complex bouquet of tart orange, warm bread, salty soil tones, a bit of citrus peel, menthol and a dollop of wild fennel in the upper register. On the palate the wine is medium-full, crisp and beautifully balanced, with a fine core of fruit, very elegant *mousse*, with beautifully integrated acids, lovely focus and a very long, poised and complex finish. This is lovely Cava from a seminal member of the Six Percent Club. 2014-2020+. **90.**

**2010 Torelló “Special Edition” Brut Reserva (Penedès)**

The 2010 Torelló “Special Edition” Brut Reserva is a blend of the “big three” grape varieties of classic Cava- forty-five percent Macabeu, thirty-five percent Xarel-lo and twenty percent Parellada, and it is aged for two years on the lees prior to disgorgement and preparation for the market. The wine is quite lovely, offering up a bright nose of grapefruit, quince, stony minerality, lime peel and a topnote of menthol. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp

and quite dry for a Brut bottling of Cava, with elegant *mousse*, good balance and very good length and grip on the youthful finish. Good juice. 2014-2020. **89.**

**2007 Codorniu “Finca de Nansa” Gran Reserva Brut (Penedès)**

The Finca de Nansa bottling from Codorniu is a brand new, single vineyard wine that might be seen as their application to have at least one of their wines in the “Six Percent Club”. The wine is comprised entirely of Xarel-lo, and this single varietal, single vineyard wine is absolutely stunning and by a wide margin, the greatest wine I have ever tasted from Codorniu. The very refined and classic nose offers up scents of tart pear, ocean breeze, wild fennel and a beautiful base of salty minerality. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and beautifully complex, with a superb core, very elegant *mousse*, bright acids and lovely focus and balance on the long and elegant finish. Stellar juice and quite the revelation. 2014-2020+. **93.**



**2007 Castello de Grabuac “Castanyer Família Suriol” Gr. Reserva Brut Nature (Penedès)**

The Castello de Grabuac is owned by the Suriol family, who are clearly very important members of the “Six Percent Club”, as they only produce wines from their own twenty-five hectares of vines in the Alt Penedès, which they farm organically. Their 2007 Castello de Grabuac’s “Castanyer Suriol” bottling of Brut Nature is comprised of a mix of eighty percent Macabeu and twenty percent Xarel-lo and spends fifty months aging on its fine lees prior to disgorgement. The wine offers up a deep and very classy bouquet of tart pear, lemon, chalky soil tones, menthol and ocean breeze. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex,

with beautiful balance, frothy *mousse*, fine focus and a very long, soil-driven and almost salty finish. This is dynamite Cava! 2014-2020+. **93.**

**2007 Huguet Finca Can Feixes Gran Reserva Brut Nature (Penedès)**

The 2007 Huguet Finca Can Feixes Gran Reserva Brut Nature is comprised of a blend of Parellada (sixty percent), Macabeu and Pinot Noir (twenty percent each), as Xarel-lo is not planted in their high altitude vineyards, and the wine was disgorged in March of 2013, after having spent more than five years on its lees. The wine offers up a superb bouquet of grapefruit, tart orange, complex and salty minerality, bread dough, lemon peel and a touch of menthol in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and full-bodied, with absolutely tiny, refined bubbles, crisp acids and great focus and grip on the very long, complex and very stylish finish. This is quite dry at around one gram per liter of *dosage*, but perfectly balanced and a joy to drink. Very high class juice. 2014-2025+. **93.**

**2007 Kripta- Agustí Torelló Mata (Penedès)**

The Kripta bottling from Agustí Torelló Mata is Spain's greatest sparkling wine and the current release from the 2007 vintage is excellent. The bouquet is deep, complex and still fairly youthful, as it offers up scents of grapefruit tart pear, lemon, salty minerality, a touch of menthol, smokiness and a bit of Catalàn *garrigue*. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and zesty, with a superb core of fruit, excellent focus and grip, frothy *mousse* and outstanding length on the perfectly balanced and racy finish. This is certainly approachable today, but it is still climbing and will be even better with a bit more bottle age. 2014-2035. **94+.**

**2007 Mestres Coquet Gran Reserva Brut Nature**

The house of Mestres is based in the village of Sant Sadurní d'Anoia, which is right in the heart of the finest area for Cava in all of Penedès. The family of Mestres has been grape growers for centuries and produced their first examples of Cava in 1925. They are clearly part of the "Six Percent Club", producing wine only from their thirty hectares of vineyards, planted with old vines, and all of their wines age on their lees under cork, rather than crown top. The house only produces Reserva and Gran Reserva level wines. The 2007 Mestres Coquet Gran Reserva Brut Nature is comprised of a blend of thirty percent Macabeu, forty percent Xarel-lo and thirty percent Parellada, and offers up an excellent bouquet of green apple, bread fruit, menthol, saline minerality, gentle bread notes and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, complex and quite stony in personality, with a lovely core, elegant *mousse*, snappy acids and excellent length and grip on the bone-dry and very well-balanced finish. This is a fine, fine example of Cava. 2014-2025. **92.**

***Rosado***

**2013 Mas Donis Rosat (Montsant)**

The 2013 Mas Donis Rosat is sealed under a screwcap, and the wine is already showing signs of permanent reduction in its stinky bouquet and palate, not to mention its clipped finish. This is really unpleasant already from the reduction, offering up a stinky nose of bug spray, overcooked asparagus, dried roses and steel pipes. On the palate the wine is medium-full, crisp and short, with a hollow mid-palate, overt, sulfur-derived bitterness from the reduction and a short, bitter and eviscerated finish. Nasty juice. 2014-2013. **78.**

**2013 Monastrell Rosado- Bodegas Castaño (Yecla)**

The 2013 Monastrell Rosado from Bodegas Castaño is sealed up under a screwcap and the wine is short and pinched on the palate as a result. The color is quite dark for a Rosado, and the nose offers up a mix of cherries, roses, a nice touch of spices and a faint hint of white soils.



On the palate the wine is medium-bodied, thin and lacking in structure or focus, with a short, clipped finish and no textural integrity. At least the nose is not yet beset by reduction, but this wine is already fully compromised by its closure of choice on the palate and has been rendered innocuous. 2014-2014. **82.**

**2012 Viña Catajarros “Elite” Rosado- Bodegas Hermanos Merino (Cigales)**

I had loved the 2011 Rosado from Bodegas Hermanos Merino, and the 2012 is an excellent follow-up. The wine is made up of a blend of eighty percent tempranillo, five percent Garnacha, and fifteen percent of two white wine grapes, Verdejo (ten percent) and Alvillos (five percent). The bouquet is beautiful, wafting from the glass in a blend of strawberries, blood orange, cherry skin, salty soil tones and a touch of smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite vinous in personality, with a good core, lovely complexity and a long, crisp and focused finish. This is unequivocally a Rosado for food at the table! Fine juice. 2014-2017. **92.**

**2011 Blanc de Vermell “LXV”- Loxarel (Penedès)**

I am not sure if this wine really qualifies as a Rosado, as this wine is made from the rare Xarel-lo Vermell grape and macerated on the skins for a couple of weeks prior to being pressed, giving the wine its very pale pink, or onion skin color. The wine offers up a complex, exotic and nicely understated nose of white cherries, dried peaches, chalky soil tones, a touch of white pepper, savory tones that remind me of a touch of sweet onion and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still quite bright, with good focus and complexity and a long, savory, and every so slightly tannic finish. Probably getting towards the tail end of its apogee, but still offering up a complex and well-balanced personality. 2014-2015. **89.**

***Albariño- Rías Baixas***

*I wrote quite a bit about Albariño back in Issue 46, when I highlighted the superb wines imported by the Spanish Artisan Wine Group. I think that it would not be a crime to repeat those introductory notes below, as this grape is really starting to tap into its immense potential, which for so many years was buried in excessive yields and utterly indifferent viticultural and cellar practices. There certainly remains an ocean of perfectly pleasant, innocuous white wines made from this noble grape, but the tide is turning and there are more and more simply stellar examples of Albariño starting to emerge from Galicia in recent times. While I have had some superb examples represented by José Pastor and a few other Spanish wine importers in the last couple of years, the leader in unearthing the finest producers of Albariño has to be Gerry Dawes and his remarkable lineup of artisanal Galician superstars. Señor Dawes has long been known as one of the most insightful and vocal proponents of Spanish wines, writing about the country and its wines for many years in a myriad of publications, including Steve Tanzer’s International Wine Cellar. A few years ago, Gerry turned his attention to importing his own portfolio of small, high-quality producers that turn out traditionally-styled wines. These wines were being largely ignored by a Spanish domestic wine market and international importers specializing in Spain, both of whom were completely obsessed by the overripe, over-oaked and alcoholic wines championed by Robert Parker’s former protégé covering Spain. So many great, classic Spanish wines were being left begging for homes, while a tidal wave of vinous crap was being touted to high heaven, and happily, Señor Dawes stepped in and started representing some of these small producers who had the temerity to keep swimming upstream and producing old school wines that speak of Spain’s great vinous history (even if no one was interested in buying them!), rather than catering to the stupidity of internationally-minded trendies and toadies. And perhaps, no section*

*of the Spanish Artisan Wine Group speaks of the unlimited potential of great traditional wines in Spain than the stellar portfolio of Albariño producers represented by Gerry Dawes.*

*Albariño has long been considered one of Spain's finest white wine grapes, but much of its history has been marked by unfulfilled potential, as the low prices that most of these wines sold for on the international market simply dictated that the grape had to be cropped high in order for winegrowers to survive economically and make a living sufficient to keep their families fed and sheltered. Happily, one is beginning to see more examples of Albariño these days that are clearly focused on maximizing the potential quality of the varietal by keeping yields much lower and searching out blocks of old vines, with the resulting wines showing a dramatically different profile of complexity and depth of flavor than was the case when the only way for a winegrower to survive with this variety was to over-crop and try to get by on volume. Much the same phenomenon can be seen in a French appellation such as Sancerre, where there continues to be oceans of rather dilute, simple and easy-drinking wine produced from very high crop yields, but where the greatest producers of the region- people such as Edmond and Anne Vatan, the Cotat cousins, Gérard Boulay and others have shown just how profound a wine can be produced from sauvignon blanc in the best terroirs of Sancerre when yields are kept down and the wines are crafted to maximize quality and complexity, rather than simply aiming to make a profit through volume.*

*A similar push upwards in quality can be seen in the region of Rías Baixas with Albariño, and the last couple of years have seen some absolutely brilliant examples cross my path from some of the top producers in the region. Before tasting these wines a couple of years ago, I never imagined that Albariño could produce such profoundly complex, intensely flavored and ageworthy wines, and this new trend may well be one of the most exciting today in all of Spain. It all began two decades ago, when a group of fourteen growers who specialize in Rías Baixas Albariño decided to form a quality-oriented growers' association, which they dubbed the "Asociación de Bodegas Artesanas", and six of these estates are now part of Señor Dawes' portfolio. One of the chief tenets of the producers in this association, besides low yields and old vines is the use solely of indigenous yeasts for the fermentation of their wines. These top estates also differ from much of the more commercially-oriented Albariño out there in choosing to bottle their wines significantly later than is customary in the more quantity-oriented houses, allowing the wines to nurture on their fine lees typically until mid-summer of the following year after the harvest (most commercial Albariño is bottled in the spring after the harvest). The growers reported on below from The Spanish Artisan Wine Group are certainly amongst the very finest of this new genre of "quality over quantity" Albariño producers, and there are very few other vigneron working with this grape with whom I have experience that can match the stunning quality of these wines. Not all of these Albariño producers are part of the Spanish Artisan Wine Group, but all of the top wines reported on below are part of this association and are worth a long and hard search of the marketplace to find any of these remaining 2010s (while we await the autumn release of their 2013s), as they are a glimpse of what may very well be an amazingly abundant future for this superb varietal.*

### **2013 Albariño- Legado del Conde (Rías Baixas)**

The 2013 Albariño from Legado del Conde comes with a plastic cork, which means it will be short-lived, but is quite proper in terms of alcohol at 12.5 percent and offers up

reasonably good depth and grip on the palate. The straightforward bouquet is a blend of tart orange, lime peel, salty soil tones and citrus blossoms. On the palate the wine is medium-full, bright and easy to drink, with a good core of fruit, ripe, gentle acids and reasonable length on the round and succulent finish. This is not one of the serious, artisanal Albariños made with indigenous yeasts and extended fine lees contact, but rather a very well-made example of commercial Albariño that is perfectly pleasant, short on complexity, but solidly potable. 2014-2015+? **87.**

**2013 Albariño- Morgadío (Rías Baixas)**

The 2013 Albariño from Morgadío is another bottle closed with a plastic cork, and like the above wine, it seems rather advanced already for a 2013 wine, without a whole lot of cut or grip on the backend. The bouquet is a fairly simplistic, but pleasant blend of orange, lime peel, a bit of ocean breeze and a bit of straw in the upper register. On the palate the wine is medium-full, clean and four-square, with a solid core, low acids, no grip and pretty good length on the round and wide open finish. This too is very short on complexity, but for drinking over the next six months, it is perfectly acceptable, and as it is not expensive, a serviceable companion for the table if no real Albariño is available. 2014-2015. **87.**

**2012 Albariño- Eidos de Padriñán (Rías Baixas)**

The 2012 Albariño from Eidos de Padriñán is also sealed with a plastic cork and the wine was showing quite advanced aromatics and flavors when I tasted it in June of this year. The nose offers up scents of pineapple, ocean breeze, a touch of menthol and a bit of soil. On the palate the wine is medium-full, soft and unstructured, with a decent core, but no structure, focus or apparent acidity. It tastes five years older than it is, and perhaps this is the function of the faulty closure- though there is no overt signs of oxidation here as of yet. Tiring briskly. 2014-2014. **80.**

**2011 Albariño “Dandelión”- Alberto Nanclares (Rías Baixas)**

This is one of the current releases from Alberto Nanclares, who is another of those artisanal producers in Rías Baixas who believe that Albariño demands some extended time aging in tank prior to bottling, if the wine is going to develop any depth and complexity. All his wines spend nearly two years on the lees prior to bottling. The Dandelión is Señor Nanclares’ entry level bottling, and it is excellent in 2011, offering up a bright and complex nose of pear, lime peel, ocean breeze, lovely minerality, citrus blossoms and a touch of lemongrass in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, fullish and shows good mid-palate depth, with lovely framing acids, excellent focus and grip and a long, complex finish. Good juice. 2014-2016. **90.**

**2011 Albariño- Alberto Nanclares (Rías Baixas)**

The 2011 Albariño bottling from Alberto Nanclares is from his oldest vines, ranging from thirty years of age all the way up to the century mark. The bouquet is deeper and more youthful than the younger vine bottle of Dandelión, wafting from the glass in a deep and complex nose of tart pear, lime, plenty of saline soil tones, lemongrass, briny oceanic overtones (these vineyards all overlook the Atlantic Ocean), stony minerality and a faint whiff of menthol. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and really rock solid at the core, with bright acids, excellent focus and grip, lovely balance and a very long, complex and vibrant finish. This is still a young bottle of wine and more complexity is going to emerge with further bottle age. Great juice. 2014-2020+. **93+.**

**2010 Albariño-Avó Roxo (Rías Baixas)**

Adega Avó Roxo is currently run by Antonio Gondar Moldes, who took over the management of the family estate only in 2007. His grandfather, Serafin Gondar began production

here in the 1930s and this was at one time one of the most famous wineries in the region, winning several awards as late as the 1970s. The family vineyard is one and a half hectares in size and planted entirely to Albariño and Antonio Gondar Moldes is dedicated to taking the quality here to the highest level, and Avó Roxo is one of the most recent inductees into the growers' association in the region. *Señor* Gondar Moldes' 2010 is also aging with great style and grace, delivering a deep and very classy bouquet of tangerine, menthol, sea breeze, lime peel, gentle stoniness and an exotic, delicate topnote of lavender. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and beautifully complex, with a fine core of fruit, excellent focus and balance and a very long, classy and bright finish. A beautiful wine that is just singing at age four and has years of life still ahead of it. 2014-2020+. **94+**.

**2010 Albariño- Cabaleiro do Val (Rías Baixas)**

The 2010 Albariño from Cabaleiro do Val is one of the riper examples in this stellar lineup, coming in at 13.5 percent alcohol, and it has not maintained quite as much cut and vibrancy as some of its brethren in this fine look back at the 2010 vintage. Readers may recall that Adega of Cabaleiro do Val is owned by Francisco "Paco" Dovalo López, who founded and is the current president of the Growers' Association here. While the winery was only officially incorporated in 1989, the family winegrowing traditions here go back centuries and *Señor* Dovalo López has some extremely old vines in his vineyard. He has taken *selection massale* cuttings from some of his one hundred and fifty year-old vines to use for replanting purposes, thus retaining the unique character of his outstanding Albariños. *Señor* López's 2010 is still a lovely drink, but has evolved a bit faster than a few of these others and now offers up a quite evolved nose of pear, hints of papaya, a touch of butter, sea salts, orange zest and a lovely base of minerality. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and classy, with a fine core, crisp framing acids and still lovely length and grip on the tertiary finish. This is still a very good drink, but I liked it even better two years ago, when it still had that sizzle of youth to go with its excellent complexity and mineral drive. A very good drink today, but perhaps its slightly higher octane level has not allowed it to age quite as well as its compatriots. 2014-2017. **92**.

**2010 Albariño "O'Forrollo"- Bodega Meis Otero (Rías Baixas)**

As I noted two years ago, Bodega Meis Otero is owned and operated by the Fernando Meis Otero, who is one of the very youngest members of the Asociación de Bodegas Artesanas. He took over the reins of the family bodega in 2001. Like many of his fellow members of the growers' association, his vineyards are located in the Val de Salnés. The family's one and a half hectares of vines used to be planted to a mix of regional grapes, but Fernand Meis Otero's father took the step to plant exclusively Albariño here in the early 1980s. Thus, the vineyards are just now coming into their prime as they close in on thirty years of age. The 2010 O'Forrollo Albariño was superb when I last tasted it two years ago, and bottle age has done nothing to dim its luster. The great nose jumps from the glass in a mix of lime peel, ocean breeze, lemongrass, a touch of menthol and a beautifully complex base of salty soil tones. On the palate the wine is fullish, crisp and complex, with a great core of fruit, superb acidity and focus, wonderful backend minerality and a very, very long, racy finish. At age four, this beautiful bottle of Albariño is just entering its prime and has plenty of life still ahead of it. 2014-2019+. **93**.

**2010 Albariño- Lagar de Broullón (Rías Baixas)**

Lagar de Broullón is owned by José Pintos, who farms this two and a half hectare vineyard in the village of Meaño, which is one of the very finest for Albariño in the Val de Salnés section of Rías Baixas. The vineyard is situated with a south by southwest exposition, allowing the grapes to reach fine ripeness each year and still maintain a great base of minerality.

The 2010 Lagar de Broullón Albariño is aging splendidly well and is still as vibrant and refreshing as it was two years ago, as it offers up a superb aromatic blend of pear, lemon, salty soil tones, a gentle touch of leesiness, orange peel and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and very, very complex, with great minerality and focus, bright acids and superb length and grip on the very classy finish. Another timeless example of Albariño. 2014-2020. **93+**.

#### **2010 Albariño- Rozas (Rías Baixas)**

The 2010 Albariño from Adega Rozas is one of the ripest of the Albariños in this lineup, coming in at 13.5 percent alcohol, but it is aging very, very gracefully and is drinking superbly well at age four. As readers may recall, the bodega is located in the village of Meaño in the Val de Salnés and is run by winegrower Manolo Dovalo. This family estate goes back several generations, and its 6.3 hectares of vineyards are loaded with old vines- many dating back more than two generations! *Señor* Dovalo insists that it is the very high percentage of old vines in this very favored section of the Val de Salnés that allows him to make such outstanding Albariños. The 2010 is still one of the finest examples of Albariño that I have ever had the pleasure to taste, offering up today a superb bouquet of tart pear, apple, menthol, dried eucalyptus, white peach, salty minerality and smoky overtones. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, crisp and beautifully complex, with an outstanding core, laser-like focus and stellar length and grip on the vibrant and classy finish. A glorious testament to the potential of Albariño! 2014-2022+. **96**.



## **Ribeiro**

### **2013 Viña Reboreda (Ribeiro)**

The 2013 Viña Reboreda is comprised primarily of Treixadura, with small percentage of Torrentés blended in, which is a pretty low acid variety. The wine is cool and crisp, at 11.5 percent alcohol, but the bottles here in the states are sealed up under a plastic cork. The bouquet is already showing quite a bit of maturity, which may be a function of its poor choice of closure, offering up scents of peach, a touch of pineapple, gentle, alluvial soil tones and just a whisper of wild flowers in the upper register. On the palate the wine is medium-bodied, soft and a bit dilute at the core, with little acidity to give brightness or grip, but a nice base of soil tones and sneaky length on the finish. This is okay, but already seems to be getting to the far side of its plateau which I assume is a function of the plastic cork, as the wine has probably only been in bottle for four or five months! 2014-2014. **84.**

### **2012 Viña de Martín “Os Pasás”- Luis Rodríguez Vázquez (Ribeiro)**

The Os Pasás from Luis Rodríguez is comprised of a blend of Treixadura, Albariño, Torrentés and Lado, with the latter three grapes blended in smaller amounts to take advantage of their higher natural acidity than the Treixadura. The 2012 is a lovely wine, wafting from the glass in an aromatic constellation of lime blossoms, tart orange, a touch of green olive, lovely, salty soil tones and gentle notes of beeswax in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and rock solid at the core, with fine focus and balance, lovely complexity and a long, intensely flavored finish. A lovely wine that is drinking beautifully today, but has the stuffing and balance to also age gracefully for several more years. 2014-2019. **90+.**

### **2011 Finca Teira Blanco - Bodegas Manuel Formigo (Ribeiro)**

Manuel Formigo de la Fuente is now in charge of his family’s vineyards in Ribeiro, tucked in a corner of Galicia just above the Portuguese border in northwestern Spain. The 2011 Finca Teira Blanco from him is a lovely follow-up to their excellent 2010 I reported on a couple of years ago. The wine is comprised of a blend of seventy percent Treixadura, twenty percent Godello and ten percent Alvilla. The bouquet offers up a bright and expressive bouquet of lime, tart orange, wild fennel, salty soil tones and white flowers in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and impressively complex, with a fine core and grip and a long, vibrant finish. This is really a lovely wine for its modest price tag. 2014-2018. **89.**

### **2011 Viña de Martín “A Teixeira”- Luis Rodríguez Vázquez (Ribeiro)**

The A Teixeira bottling is new from Luis Rodríguez, being produced entirely from Treixadura and raised in large, French oak *foudres* that were probably quite new in 2011. The wine comes in at a cool 12.5 percent alcohol and offers up a fine bouquet of pear, lemon blossom, white soil tones, a touch of butter and a gentle base of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and crisp, with excellent mid-palate depth, fine focus and very good length and grip on the buttery finish. The wood here is done quite intelligently, but as the *foudres* are still fairly new, they do seem to have taken just a bit of complexity away from the finished wine. Perhaps this will change as the *foudres* get a bit older and the wood influence on the wine is more discreet. It is still a very good bottle, with the balance to age well, but I miss a bit of complexity. 2014-2020. **90.**

### **2011 A Torna dos Pasas- Luis Rodríguez Vázquez (Ribeiro)**

The A Torna dos Pasas from Luis Rodríguez is comprised of a blend of traditional Galician red grapes, with the *cépages* consisting of forty percent Brancellao, and twenty percent each of Caiño Redondo, Caiño Longo and Ferrol (not that I am familiar with any of these grapes!), with the vines grown on steep granite sites and the wine aged in old barrels. The 2011



A Torna dos Pasas tips the scales at a cool 12.5 percent alcohol and offers up a vibrant nose of cherries, pomegranate, fresh thyme, gentle notes of woodsmoke, stony soil tones (one can really smell the granite) and a gentle topnote of chicory. On the palate the wine is fullish, tangy and sappy at the core, with lovely soil signature, moderate tannins and a long, slightly tarry finish. I really love the combination here of sappy fruit, strong soil signature and plenty of fresh herbs on both the nose and palate, which give the wine personality to burn. Really a terrific bottle that should be even better with a year or two of bottle age, as there is some good underlying structure here. Fine juice. 2014-2025+. **91.**

#### **2010 Teira X- Bodegas Manuel Formigo (Ribeiro)**

I was very happy to have a chance to revisit Manuel Formigo's 2010 "Teira X" bottling, which hails from some of his very oldest vines in their top vineyard site, Finca Miño Teira. The wine is a blend of sixty percent Treixadura, fifteen percent each Albariño and Alvilla and ten percent Loureira and is produced in tiny quantities. The 2010 Teira X has aged very well since I last tasted it, two years ago, and now offers up a deep, complex and nicely mature bouquet of pear, papaya, a touch of buttered almonds, a beautiful base of soil tones, orange peel and a touch of vanilla bean. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and very well-balanced, with still very good acidity, fine focus and grip and a very long, classy finish. This is a beautiful bottle that still has years of life ahead of it, despite it now having reached its apogee. 2014-2022. **93.**

#### **2009 Viña de Martin "Escolma"- Luis Rodríguez Vázquez (Ribeiro)**

The Escolma bottling from Señor Rodríguez is his old vine cuvée, which is also made from a blend of blend of Treixadura, Albariño, Torrentés and Lado, but with the vines ranging from twenty to more than forty years of age. The wine is fermented in stainless steel and then aged in a combination of new and old, large French oak barrels. The 2009 is truly stunning wine, at its apogee of maturity right now and soaring from the glass in a deep and very complex mix of lemon, clementine, a beautifully complex base of salty soil tones, wild fennel, citrus oil, just a whisper of buttery oak and a gentle topnote of acacia blossoms. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, round on the attack and rock solid at the core, with great focus and balance, lovely framing acids and a very, very long, crisp and complex finish. The old vines here give this wine a dimension that is really impressive. One of the best Ribeiro white wines I have ever had the pleasure to taste, the 2009 Escolma is at its apogee today, but will continue to cruise along for years to come. 2014-2020+. **94.**

#### **2009 A Torna dos Pasas "Escolma"- Luis Rodríguez Vázquez (Ribeiro)**

The Escolma bottling of A Torna dos Pasas is made from a field blend of indigenous, old vine fruit on the steepest, south-facing section of his vineyards here in the town of Arnoia. It is a touch riper than the regular bottling, coming in at an even thirteen percent, and sees a bit of new wood during its twelve months in barrel. Señor Rodríguez also gives this wine three years of bottle age prior to releasing it, so that the 2009 is the new release of this reserve wine, which he only produces in top vintages. The 2009 offers up a deep and youthful bouquet of black cherries, a bit of spiced meats, stony soil tones, fresh herbs (again, lots of thyme in the mix), a bit of tree bark and a very gentle framing of cedary wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and focused, with a sappy core of fruit, excellent soil signature, ripe, beautifully integrated tannins, fine acids and a very long, complex and palate staining finish. This is very serious juice that will age for decades! 2014-2035+. **93+.**

## **Envínate**

*Envínate is a new winemaking joint-venture formed by four friends who met at oenological school at the University of Miguel Hernandez in Alicante. The four young winemakers, Roberto Santana, Alfonso Torrente, Laura Ramos and José Martínez, after graduating from school in 2005, began their business as consultants, but have evolved into the winemaking team for several vineyard owners with fine parcels with whom they have now formed joint ventures in regions such as Extremadura, Ribeira Sacra and the Canary Islands. The team from Envínate works alongside of their vineyard-owning partners in the vines all through the season, and then turns their production into vinous treasures. Seeking to highlight the unique terroirs of each parcel of vines that they work with, they use no chemical treatments in the vineyards, harvest everything by hand, ferment solely with indigenous yeasts, eschew modern winemaking parlor tricks like extraction enzymes and the like and do all of their crushing by foot. The wines tend to also be on the low sulfur side of the equation, are not new oaky and are really tremendously complex and vibrant wines of great personality and breed. This was my first experience with any of the Envínate wines, and I was extremely impressed by what this team of young winemakers are turning out from a handful of regions along the Atlantic coast. What I like is each wine also lists the name of the farmer who the team works with in each region, but I have omitted these names in the titles of the wines to make them a bit less complicated. Rather than list each Envínate wine in its own geographical category, it made more sense to list them all together here, as they bear a strong family resemblance of excellence and uncompromising traditional styles. None of the wines is made in large quantities. These are truly spectacular wines and are worth a special search of the market to find! The wines of Envínate are represented here in the US by José Pastor.*

### **2012 Tinto Amarela “Parcela Valdemedel”- Envínate (Extremadura)**

Tinto Amarela is the local name for the Trincadeira grape, which is grown an hour away across the Portuguese frontier in Alentejo. The grape grown in the Parcela Valdemedel benefits from the north-facing orientation of the vineyard, the five hundred meter elevation and the fine base of limestone in the soil. The 2012 comes in at a cool 13.5 percent alcohol (for the scorching climate of Extremadura this is low octane!) and offers up a superbly complex nose of sweet dark berries, bitter chocolate, a bit of tree bark, fresh herb tones, a lovely soil signature and a bit of the grape’s signature oak leaf aromatics. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and sappy at the core, with a very soil-driven personality, moderate tannins, lovely focus and complexity and a very long, well-balanced and refined finish. Picture a cross of un-oaked Baudry Chinon and Volnay and you get an idea of the style of this outstanding wine. Great juice. 2014-2030+. **93+**.

### **2012 Táganan “Parcela Margalagua”- Envínate (Tenerife)**

Táganan is the local name for the vineyards on the northeastern side of the island of Tenerife. The vineyards here are planted on rocky volcanic soils with a mixture of old vines, the origins of which are not recorded, so this is the ultimate “field blend”. The 2012 Táganan is thirteen percent alcohol and offers up a fine and complex nose of black cherries, wild herbs, tree bark, a bit of bonfire and espresso. On the palate the wine is medium-full and very pinot noir-like in texture (though not in flavors), with fine intensity of flavor, impressive complexity, moderate tannins, excellent focus and lovely length and grip on the tangy finish that closes with a touch of acorn. Another terrific wine from the team at Envínate! 2014-2025+. **93**.

### 2012 Táganan Blanco “Parcela Amogoje”- Envínate (Tenerife)

The 2012 Táganan Blanco “Parcela Amogoje” from Envínate is made from a field blend of hundred year-old, wild vines, growing on volcanic soils one hundred to two hundred meters above the Atlantic Ocean. The vines are untrained, running wild on the ground and are on their own, indigenous rootstocks, as phylloxera has never been known on the Canary Islands. The vineyard is owned by José Angel Alonso, and the wine is fermented in one year-old, five hundred liter oak barrels and aged one year on its fine lees prior to bottling. The 2012 is truly spectacular, soaring from the glass in a deep and complex mix of candied lime peel, pear, briny soil tones (very reminiscent of grand cru Chablis, only saltier, if this makes any sense), beeswax, lemon blossoms and just a whisper of vanillin oak from the one year-old *demi-muid*. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and impeccably balanced, with the palate authority of aged Bâtard-Montrachet, lovely acids, great focus and grip and a very, very long and utterly refined finish. This is a brilliant wine that totally transcends anything I have ever tasted from the Canary Islands, and really is quite reminiscent of medium-aged grand cru Côte de Beaune, albeit, with completely different aromatic and flavor profiles. Stunning juice. 2014-2020+. **95.**



### 2012 Lousas “Parcela Camiño Novo”- Envínate (Ribeira Sacra)

The name of the two bottlings from Ribeira Sacra that I tasted from Envínate, Lousas, is the local dialect for the slate soils in this section of the region, centered around the town of Amandi. The Parcela Camiño Novo, which is owned by Pablo González, is produced from

seventy year-old vines and is a blend of ninety percent Mencía and ten percent Garnacha Tintorera. It is aged in old oak barrels prior to bottling. The Camiño Novo sits at an elevation of 430 meters above sea level, forming an amphitheater above the Sil River, and is one of the coolest sites in Ribeira Sacra. The 2012 is an outstanding wine, offering up a deep and classic bouquet of black cherries, pomegranate, slate, a touch of graphite, woodsmoke, fresh herbs and a gentle topnote of tree bark. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and marvelously complex, with a sappy core, a marvelous soil signature, moderate tannins and a long, tangy and very refined finish that is the absolute essence of Ribeira Sacra excellence. Superb juice. 2014-2035. **93+**.

**2012 Lousas “Parcela Seoane”- Envínate (Ribeira Sacra)**

The Parcela Seoane bottling from Envínate hails from a vineyard owned by Miguel Anxo, which faces southwest in its exposition and is planted with vines that are in excess of eighty years of age. The 2012 is an absolute classic, wafting from the glass in a complex and very pure aromatic constellation of black cherries, dark berries, espresso, marvelous soil tones (slate augmented by lead pencil nuances) and herb tones redolent of turmeric and marjoram. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely light on its feet, with an excellent core of fruit ripe, well-integrated tannins, fine focus and nascent complexity and a long, primary and superb finish. I love the synthesis here of sappy black fruit and very strong soil signature- all this beauty needs is a couple of years in the cellar to start to show some of its secondary layers of complexity. An excellent Ribeira Sacra. 2016-2035. **93+**.

***Ribera Sacra***

**2012 Mencía - Adegas Algueira (Ribeira Sacra)**

I love the wines from Algueira, and their 2012 Mencía is outstanding. The wine comes in at an even thirteen percent alcohol and offers up a bright and bouncy bouquet of cherries, pomegranate, fresh herbs, graphite, smoke and a touch of tree bark. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and light on its feet, with lovely transparency, excellent intensity of flavor, still a bit of chewy tannin and a long, focused and complex finish that closes with notes of slate and tree bark. This is still a pretty young wine and I would be inclined to give it another two or three years in the cellar to allow the tannins to fade away a bit, so that the lovely fruit and great soil signature can take center stage on the palate. Fine juice. 2017-2035+. **92**.

**2012 Mencía- Guímaro (Pedro Rodríguez)**

The 2012 Mencía from Guímaro is another in a long line of excellent wines from Pedro Rodríguez. The bouquet is a bright and vibrant constellation of red berries, pomegranate, woodsmoke, lovely soil tones, a touch of caramel, plenty of fresh herbs and an underpinning of slate. On the palate the wine is medium-full, complex and very well-balanced, with a fine core of fruit, lovely focus and bounce, modest tannins and a long, wide open and quite soil-driven finish. This vintage from Señor Rodríguez bears more than a passing resemblance to a top-notch Pinot d'Aunis from the Loire Valley, and is really a lovely wine for drinking over the next couple of decades. 2014-2025. **90**.

**2012 Décima Amandi Mencía- José Manuel Rodríguez (Ribeira Sacra)**

José Manuel Rodríguez is the head of the growers' association of Ribeira Sacra, and I had loved his bottlings of Mencía that I had the chance to taste a year ago from the 2011 and 2010 vintages. Not surprisingly, the 2012 Décima is another outstanding bottle. The wine offers up a deep and very classy bouquet of pomegranate, woodsmoke, a beautiful base of slate soil tones, coffee bean, a touch of gamebird and really lovely, exotic spices tones redolent of turmeric and

saffron. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and beautifully transparent, with a sappy core of fruit, modest tannins and a very, very long, complex and silky finish. Just a beautiful bottle of Mencía. 2014-2030. **93+**.

### **2011 Momento Bueno de la Vida (Treixadura)- Adega Algueira**

Adega Algueira is located in the Amandi section of Ribera Sacra, overlooking the Sil River, with lots of old vines that have been reclaimed and nursed back to health since the founding of the winery in the late 1980s. Their 2011 Momento Bueno de la Vida, shortened to its acronym of MBV on the label, is comprised solely of old vine Treixadura, from vineyards that range from thirty up to eighty years of age, and the wine is foot-trodden (like the Trebbiano of Emidio Pepe!) and fermented solely with indigenous yeasts. The wine offers up a superb and complex bouquet of pear, buttered almonds, a touch of ginger, smoky overtones, delicate notes of citrus zest and an exotic topnote of lavender. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and tertiary in its complexity, with a great core of fruit, fine focus and a very long, pure and wide open finish. This is a beautiful bottle of mature and classy white wine that clearly proves that Ribera Sacra is not only red wine country! 2014-2020. **94**.

### **2011 Escalada (Godello)- Adega Algueira**

The Godello bottling from Algueira is also produced from vineyards ranging from thirty to eighty years of age, all grown on the schist hillsides overlooking the river. The wine is excellent in 2011, and still a bit young and reduced, taking a bit of time in decanter to really blossom and deliver its excellent bouquet of pineapple, pear, fresh rosemary, a nice touch of petrol and a complex base of stony soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and absolutely rock solid at the core, with crisp acids, excellent focus and grip and a very long, pure and racy finish. This is great wine as well, with a bit less development in evidence in comparison to the MBV bottling above, but with every bit as much quality. Great juice. 2014-2020+. **93**.

### **2011 Pizarra (Mencía)- Adega Algueira**

The 2011 Pizarra from Algueira is made from eighty year-old Mencía vines in one of their due-south facing terraces above the River Sil, with the grapes foot-trodden and then aged for twelve months in old barrels and another twelve months in bottle prior to release. The 2011 Pizarra is a stellar wine, soaring from the glass in a vibrant mélange of black cherries, dark berries, espresso, a superb base of slate soil tones and a Morey St. Denis-like topnote of mustard seed. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and quite sappy at the core, with moderate tannins, lovely complexity and great length and grip on the focused and beautifully balanced finish that closes with a distinct note of tree bark. Excellent Mencía! 2-14-2030+. **93+**.

### **2011 Fincas (Caiño and Souson)- Adega Algueira**

The 2011 Algueira Fincas bottling is again made from eighty year-old vines, but this time from the indigenous grapes of Caiño and Souson. It is fermented and aged in the same manner as the Pizarra (foot-trodden, wild yeasts and twelve months in old casks, followed by twelve months of additional bottle age) and is absolutely stunning wine. The wine offers up an outstanding aromatic constellation of dark berries, cassis, graphite, slate, a touch of fresh herbs, woodsmoke, a bit of nuttiness redolent of pecans and a nice topnote of chipotle peppers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and even lighter on its feet than the Pizarra, with superb intensity of flavor, great focus and grip and a very long, pure and transparent finish of excellent complexity and breed. Great juice. 2014-2030+. **94**.

### **2011 Don Bernardino Mencía (Ribeira Sacra)**

Don Bernardino is the wine label for the region's important restaurateur, Emilio Rodríguez Díaz. The steep vineyards for his red wine lie in the village of Amandi, overlooking the Sil River. I tasted this excellent Mencía (along with its 2010 counterpart) about fifteen months ago, and the wine has aged beautifully and is even better than it was at that time. Offering up a truly stunning nose of pomegranate, graphite, espresso, a touch of tree bark and a lovely base of slate soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very pure on the attack, with excellent complexity, still a touch of tannin and superb grace and grip on the long and classy finish. Quintessential Mencía from Ribeira Sacra. 2014-2030+. **93+**.

### **2011 Peza do Rei Mencía- Adega Cachín (Ribeira Sacra)**

The 2011 Peza do Rei Mencía from Adega Cachín is pretty ripe for this region and varietal, coming in at 13.5 percent alcohol, and the wine does show a bit of backend heat on the palate. The bouquet is ripe and rather jammy for Mencía, offering up notes of black cherries, woodsmoke, a bit of smoked meat, coffee bean, a touch of cedar and slightly medicinal overtones. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, plump and pretty simple, with a good core, modest tannins, not a whole lot of focus or delineation and the aforementioned heat on the backend taking away further elegance on the reasonably long finish. This is okay wine, but given how many truly superb examples of Mencía are produced these days in Ribera Sacra, this is a pretty disappointing attempt to join the party. 2014-2020. **84**.

### **2010 Toalde Mencía- Roberto Regal (Ribeira Sacra)**

Roberto Regal only owns about one hectare of Mencía vines, planted in a very steep vineyard overlooking the Miño River. I last tasted his 2010 almost two years ago, and the wine is evolving beautifully and is wide open and drinking with great style. The deep, complex and utterly superb bouquet delivers scents of cassis, espresso, coffee, bean, tree bark, a touch of squid ink, graphite and a gently medicinal topnote that recalls fine Cornas. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and beautifully balanced, with a superb core, still a touch of backend tannin and a long, tangy and transparent finish. This is just a beautiful bottle of Mencía that has reached its apogee, but has decades of life still ahead of it. 2014-2035. **93**.

### **2010 Viña Cazoga Mencía- Jorge Carnero (Ribeira Sacra)**

As I noted back in Issue 46, Viña Cazoga has a long and illustrious history of fine wine production in the Ribeira Sacra and was once one of the largest and most important estates in the area, but for most of the twentieth century, as the region was abandoned by younger generations, Jorge Carnero's family's vineyard holdings in the village of Amandi decreased markedly. Happily, the twenty-first century has witnessed a renaissance in Ribeira Sacra, and today the Carnero family owns a prime, 3.9 hectare parcel of vines right above the Sil River. Almost the entire vineyard is planted with vines in excess of one hundred years of age, with ninety-five percent planted to Mencía and the balance made up of a mix of Tempranillo and Merenzao. The 2010 Viña Cazoga Mencía is another wine that I had not seen in almost two years, and the wine has softened a bit structurally over that time and is every bit as stunning as it was in the summer of 2012, soaring from the glass in a deep and utterly superb aromatic constellation of dark berries, coffee bean, a beautifully complex base of soil tones, lead pencil (from the slate *terroir*, not new wood), turmeric and a nice topnote of woodsmoke. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and still showing a bit of tannin to resolve, with great focus and mid-palate intensity and a very long, pure and balanced finish that closes with great grip and soil signature. While this is quite approachable today, I would still be inclined to leave this tucked away in the

cellar for three or four more years and really let it reach its apogee. Mencía at its finest! 2017-2035+. **94.**

**2010 Mencía “Finca Pombeitas”- Guímaro (Pedro Rodríguez)**

The single vineyard bottling of Finca Pombeitas bottling from Pedro Rodríguez is one hundred percent foot-trodden and a stunning bottle of Mencía. The bouquet is complex, pure and very refined in its exuberant blend of black cherries, dark berries, woodsmoke, gamebirds, mustard seed, beautifully refined soil tones and a bit of espresso. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, long and rock solid at the core, with great soil definition, ripe, well-integrated tannins, tangy acids and a very long, very complete and remarkably complex finish that closes with a classical note of graphite. This wine literally smells like a cooler vintage of Les Amoureuses (and I have drunk plenty of Chambolle in my day), though it is more classically Ribeira Sacra on the palate, and is an utterly stunning bottle of wine. It is certainly approachable today, but it is still pretty primary, and three or four years of bottle age would certainly not compromise its complexity! 2017-2040. **94+.**

**2010 Mencía “Finca Meixemán”- Guímaro (Pedro Rodríguez)**

The Finca Meixemán from Pedro Rodríguez hails from a parcel of seventy year old Mencía vines, is also foot-trodden and raised primarily in old oak barrels (though a couple might be newish). To my palate this is absolutely classic Ribeira Sacra Mencía, as opposed to the more exotically Chambolle-Musigny personality of the Finca Pombeitas, offering up a pure, complex and very classy nose of dark berries, pomegranate, graphite, a touch of bonfire, fresh herbs and a lovely base of slate soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and very refined in its balance, with a superb core, a lovely soil-driven personality, tangy acids, moderate tannins and a long, primary and very promising finish. This is going to be stunning juice, but it needs a few years in the cellar. 2019-2040. **94+.**

**2010 Mencía “Finca Capeliños”- Guímaro (Pedro Rodríguez)**

The Finca Capeliños from Guímaro hails from ninety-five year-old Mencía vines and is handled exactly the same in the cellar as the other single vineyard wines here, foot-trodden, fermented with indigenous yeasts and aged in old, Burgundy barrels for twelve to fourteen months before bottling. The 2010 is spectacular and again, rather Burgundian in its aromatic profile, soaring from the glass in a blend of dark berries, black cherries, graphite, espresso, bonfires, a bit of venison and subtle notes of charred wood in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and utterly suave on the attack, with a beautiful core of fruit, great soil inflection, ripe tannins, tangy acids and a very, very long, complex and focused finish that closes with a medicinal tone that reminds me of old school Hermitage. It is beyond my capabilities to pick a favorite between these three stunning, single vineyard bottlings of Mencía! Great juice. 2018-2040. **94+.**

**2009 Mencía - Adega Algueira (Ribeira Sacra)**

The 2009 Mencía was my first introduction to the superb wines from Adega Algueira, as I had the pleasure to drink this at dinner on evening in Barcelona back during my first visit to Cataluña back in July of 2012. The 2009 vintage Mencía came in at an even thirteen percent alcohol and offers up a ripe and very pure bouquet of red and black cherries, bitter chocolate, slate soil tones, vinesmoke, a vibrant touch of blood orange and a whisper of oak. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish and very intensely flavored, with a lovely core, modest tannins and outstanding length and grip on the very well-balanced and nascently complex finish. Lovely



juice that was just starting out on its journey two summers ago and will clearly last a couple of decades in the cellar. 2012-2035. **94.**

**2008 Viña Cazoga “Don Diego” Mencía- Jorge Carnero (Ribeira Sacra)**

Two years ago, when I last tasted the Don Diego bottling from Jorge Carnero, I thought that the wine was very well done, but that the bit of oak in its aromatic and flavor profiles was unnecessary, and I preferred the 2010 regular bottling to the Don Diego 2008. Twenty-four months further on, I now confess the errors of my ways, as this wine is spectacular! Readers may recall that this cuvée spends six to twelve months of its *elevage* in four year-old, five hundred liter French oak barrels prior to bottling and is released after further bottle age. As I noted at that time, even though *Señor* Carnero used four year-old barrels for the *elevage* of this wine, the Mencía grape still shows a fair bit of wood influence. Happily, with further bottle age, the wood influence here has receded into a very pleasant and gentle topnote of cedar, and the old vines here have begun to really strut their stuff, as the wine soars from the glass in a blaze of black cherries, pomegranate, lead pencil (again, soil-derived), smoke, slate and that touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and very, very refined, with tangy acids, modest tannins and stunning length and grip on the focused and utterly classy finish. A beautiful bottle of wine. 2014-2035. **95.**



*Some of the perilously steep, slate vineyards overlooking the Sil River owned by the superstar estate of Algueira.*

***Valdeorras***

**2012 Casal Novo Godello- Adegas O Casal (Valdeorras)**

The 2012 Casal Novo Godello is a very good example of this lovely variety, raised entirely in stainless steel and offering up a deep and complex nose of pear, tart oranges, ocean

breeze, a bit of straw and dried flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and a bit forceful in style, with a good core, sound acids and fine length and grip on the complex, but slightly bitter finish. This is good juice, but I would have loved to have seen just a more finesseful step on the backend of the palate. 2014-2016. **88.**

**2012 Louro Godello- Rafael Palacios (Valdeorras)**

The 2012 Godello from Rafael Palacios is pretty ripe at 13.5 percent alcohol and a bit forceful in style, from what I expect was some extended skin contact early on. The nose is not bad, offering up scents of pineapple, white peach, a touch of beeswax, salty soil tones and a discreet topnote of lemon peel. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and nicely focused, with a rock solid core, sound framing acids and good grip on the powerful, fairly soft and slightly short finish. There are some really good raw materials here, but I would have loved to have seen *Señor* Palacios use a lighter touch in the cellars. Not bad, but certainly not first division Godello. 2014-2015. **86.**

**2012 Sábrego Godello- Rafael Palacios (Valdeorras)**

The Louro Godello above is imported into the US by Classical Wines of Spain, while the Sábrego bottling is represented by Eric Solomon, but I wonder how different are the two wines, or if they are different cuvées of what is essentially the same wine produced by Rafael Palacios. In any event, the 2012 Sábrego Godello claims thirteen percent alcohol on the label and seems a bit cooler in its aromatic profile of pineapple, pear, a touch of green olive, ocean breeze and a touch of white soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and plump at the core, with good acids, a bit of backend heat and a nice signature of soil on the modestly long, slightly spritzy finish. These two wines could be as distinct as different cultured yeasts and more CO2 at bottling. Not a great Godello. 2014-2015. **85.**

**2011 D. Berna Godello- Adegas D. Berna (Valdeorras)**

As I noted a couple of years ago, Adegas D. Berna is owned by the young husband and wife team of Berna Guitián and Elena Blanco, who together with their talented consulting enologist, José Luis Murcia, specialize in the beautiful white wine variety of Godello. Their 2011 version is a superb follow-up to the 2010 I last tried, as the wine offers up a superb nose of lime, green apple, sea salts, a nice touch of grassiness, a complex base of soil tones and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with a lovely core, excellent focus and grip and a long, vibrant and classy finish. I love good Godello, and this is a stellar example! 2014-2017. **92.**

**2010 A Silveira Godello- Adegas O Barreiro (Valdeorras)**

I tasted this superb bottling of Godello two years ago, and time seems to have barely touched it in the interim, as it has developed a bit more complexity, without losing any of its vibrancy and bounce. The estate is owned by Pepe Rodriguez, who retired from his first career to tend vines and make wine in this isolated corner of Valdeorras which looks down upon the Sil River valley. His beautiful 2010 Godello is aging beautifully and offers up today an aromatic constellation of lemon blossoms, pear, white soil tones, an exotic touch of fresh banana, wild fennel and dried flowers in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and beautifully complex, with a great core of fruit, outstanding focus and length and an excellent purity and breed on the very long finish. Godello is one of the greatest white wine grapes of Spain, and here is a prime example of just how magical the potential is here for this lovely variety. 2014-2020. **93+.**

## ***Asturias***

### **2012 Seis Octavos Tinto- Monasterio de Corias**

The 2012 Seis Octavos Tinto from Monasterio de Corias is produced from a blend of sixty percent Albarín Negro and forty percent Mencía, grown in this cool microclimate on slate soils. The wine tips the scales at a cool twelve percent alcohol and offers up bright and complex nose of pomegranate, tree bark, chicory, fresh herb tones graphite and charred wood. On the palate the wine is medium-full, bright and bouncy, with a good core, tangy acids, modest tannins and fine length and grip on the complex and gently tarry finish. This is really a lovey wine, with the weight of a cru Beaujolais and the flavors quite reminiscent of Ribeira Sacra. Fine juice. 2014-2020+. **88.**

### **2010 Diez Mesas Barrica Tinto- Monasterio de Corias**

The Diez Mesas Barrica Tinto from Monasterio de Corias is made from a field blend of older vines (twenty to eighty years of age) that includes Albarín Negro and Mencía, and the wine spends ten months in a mix of new and old French *barriques* prior to bottling. This is pretty ripe by the standards of cool Asturias, tipping the scales at 12.5 percent alcohol and delivers a lovely bouquet of cherries, pomegranate, woodsmoke, a touch of saffron-like spices, wild fennel and a gentle framing of cedar. On the palate the wine is medium-full, bright and bouncy, with a lovely core of fruit, great soil drive, tangy acids, moderate tannins and excellent length and grip on the focused, complex and very well-balanced finish. The wine closes with a nice, understated note of tree bark and really impressive palate persistence. This is excellent. 2014-2025+. **92.**

## ***Bierzo***

### **2012 Brezo Blanco- Grégory Pérez**

The Brezo Blanco from Grégory Pérez is made of a blend of eighty percent Godello and twenty percent Doña Blanca, with the vine age ranging from thirty years all the way up to eighty years of age. The 2012 Brezo offers up a really superb nose of pear, kaffir lime, ocean breeze, white flowers and a lovely base of soil tones. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and complex, with lovely mid-palate depth, sound framing acids, lovely focus and grip and a very long, ripe and complex finish. There is not a lot of cut here, but the wine is beautifully balanced and shows plenty of freshness and lovely backend vinosity. It will not make old bones, but for drinking over the next year or two, this is a lovely wine with plenty of stuffing and elegance. 2014-2015. **90.**

### **2012 El Pájaro Rojo Mencía- Losada Vinos de Finca**

The 2012 El Pájaro Rojo is pretty ripe for Mencía, coming in at 13.5 percent alcohol, and the wine does show some heat on the backend. The nose is ripe and attractive in its blend of black cherries, coffee grounds, dark soil tones, chicory and a touch of tree bark. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, plush and fairly simple, with a good core, moderate tannins and some backend bitterness to go along with uncovered alcohol on the fairly long, four-square finish. This is not particularly exciting, and really seems to have needed to have been picked earlier. 2014-2020. **84.**

### **2008 Mencía Roble- Alvarez de Toledo**

The 2008 Mencía Roble from Alvarez de Toledo is a very nice bottle of wine that has seen just a bit too much new wood, which cuts the finish a bit short and adds some dry wood tannins that are unnecessary and keep the wine's score down a bit. The bouquet is very good, wafting from the glass in a mix of dark berries, espresso, dark soil tones, woodsmoke, a touch of fresh herbs and cedary new oak. On the palate the wine is fullish, complex and impressive on the

attack, with a good core, but a clipped finish, as the wood tannins start to intrude. This would probably be stellar if raised all in one wine or two wine barrels, as the raw materials here are quite strong. 2013-2018. **87.**

### ***Monterrei***

#### **2013 Godello- Finca Os Cobatos (Screwcap)**

This is a beautiful bottle of Godello that is already starting to have its aromatic and flavor profiles “scalped” by the closure. We took the sample and dumped it in a decanter to wake it up a bit, but this is a wine desperately in search of a non-reductive closure for the next vintage, as this is really well-made juice under its unfortunate screwcap. The bouquet is a complex mix of lemon, tart pear, a touch of wild fennel, salty, white soil tones and orange peel. On the palate the wine is medium-full, fresh and complex, with a fine core, nice bounce and focus and a long, crisp finish that closes with lovely grip. The first signs of reduction are already written on the wall for this wine and it will need to be consumed in its youth (despite having the structural savvy to age at least a few years if it were under cork), and I would highly recommend decanting it for twenty minutes or so to try and unlock the wine prior to drinking it. I sincerely hope the 2014 will be bottled exclusively under cork, as there is good winemaking here. 2014-2015. **87.**



*The sun going down over the vineyards in Bierzo- time to fire up the grill and break out the tapas.*

### ***Tierra de León***

#### **2012 El Asprendiz- Leyenda del Páramo**

The 2012 El Asprendiz from Leyenda del Páramo is made up of one hundred percent Preto Picudo and is aged in new and one wine barrels, with a mix of French and American oak. The wine is only thirteen percent alcohol and offers up scents of dark berries, tree bark, bitter

chocolate, chicory and black pepper. On the palate the wine is medium-full, chewy and a bit coarse on the backend, with good, but not great depth at the core, moderate complexity, some dry-edged tannins and good length and grip on the youthful finish. This wine clearly needs some time in the cellar to soften up its tannins, but I really wonder how much pleasure it will deliver, even when the tannins start to soften. Strange brew and the odds are just as good that the fruit will fade before the tannins and the wine never really deliver much drinking enjoyment. 2017-2022+? **84+**?

## **Rueda**

### **2012 Verdejo “Martínsancho”- Bodegas Ángel Rodríguez**

This was my first taste of a wine from Ángel Rodríguez’s Martínsancho vineyard, which includes a one hectare plot of ungrafted, ancient Verdejo vines, which are credited with keeping this grape variety alive in Rueda in the 1970s, when most of his neighbors replanted to more prolific grapes such as Viura or Palomino. In 1976, Señor Rodríguez planted twenty-five hectares of vineyard land with cuttings from his original vines, firmly re-establishing Verdejo in the region. His Martínsancho bottling is fermented in glass-lined tanks and then aged in ancient *foudres* in his old underground cellars. The 2012 is an excellent wine, wafting from the glass in a deep and complex blend of tart pear, lime peel, green olive, salty soil tones, lemongrass and a nice touch of fresh herbs. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with a fine core, still good acids and excellent length and grip. Clearly this wine saw a bit of extended skin contact, and this has really given it some mid-palate stuffing. Lovely, old school juice. 2014-2017+. **92+**.

### **2011 Nosis Verdejo- Buil & Giné**

The 2011 Nosis Verdejo from Buil & Giné was sealed with a plastic cork, so I have no idea if the wine was slightly advanced or spot on in its development. That said, the wine was really showing very well indeed, with some complexity of maturity emerging in its aromatic constellation of green peach, ocean breeze, green olive, a touch of beeswax and a bit of lemongrass in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and shows off some lovely savory flavors, with a fine core of fruit, a nice base of soil and very good length on the mature and fairly low acid finish. It is interesting, as the balance is so fine here that the low acidity does not take away from the wine’s precision on the backend, though it would be nice if it still had a bit more bounce and grip. The raw materials here are exemplary, and I would love to see this wine sealed under a natural cork to see if the plastic closure affected its evolution at all. The wine is drinking very well right now, but I would not hold it a lot longer. 2014-2015. **88.**

### **2010 Nosis Verdejo- Buil & Giné**

The 2010 Nosis Verdejo from Buil & Giné is also sealed under a plastic cork, but it seems even a touch fresher than the 2011. The bouquet is deep, complex and nicely evolved, offering up scents of beeswax, lime peel, green olive, salty soil tones, a touch of fern and a topnote of citrus blossoms. On the palate the wine is medium-full, bright and suave, with a fine core, impressive complexity, very gentle acidity, but still good freshness on the long and beautifully balanced finish. Again, this is getting to the far side of its plateau, but this could be affected by its closure. The Nosis bottling is very obviously a serious example of Verdejo and I would love to see it sealed up in the future under natural cork, so that questions about the wine’s evolution would not revolve around its closure! That said, this wine is still drinking very well and will do so for another year or two. 2014-2016. **89.**

## **Ribera del Duero**

*This region used to be one of my absolute favorites for red wines, but for a long time now, it has been a haven to the modernistas in Spain, with most wines that I cross paths with from Ribera del Duero routinely too ripe and too oaky for my tender palate. However, in preparation for this report, I was sent some samples from a relatively new producer in Ribera del Duero, Goyo Garcia Viadero, and I was absolutely blown away by what I tasted! Goyo Garcia Viadero only began producing his own wines in Ribera del Duero in 2003, looking to return to an older style of wines that were once prevalent in this region. He has three distinct parcels of vines to work with, planted to tempranillo and (in two of the vineyards) some white varieties, which he co-ferments to produce his red wines. This was very much the style in Ribera del Duero a couple of generations ago, and Goyo is looking to return to that era of unmanipulated wines here. The wines even come in Jean-Marie Fourrier shaped bottles, to further distinguish them from the pack in Ribera del Duero, and they are exceptional in quality. He tends to pick his wines based on acidity, trying to bring the grapes in while the acids are still at a reasonable level and the sugars have not soared out of control (most of his wines are 13.5 percent alcohol, which is decidedly “cool” by modern standards in Ribera del Duero), and he ages the wines for the most part in ancient oak barrels to minimize the wood influence in his wines. He also tends to practice a cellar regimen that minimizes the amount of SO<sub>2</sub> that he uses, and this is my only concern with the beautiful nature of his wines. I have scored his wines below as if they will age as long and gracefully as any other wines from the region, but I personally have not had very good luck with low sulfur bottlings from other producers, and it may well be that I have overestimated how long the wines will evolve in bottle. But, that said, Goyo Garcia Viadero is a very bright, new shining star in Ribera del Duero, and even if it turns out that his structured young wines only last six to eight years in the bottle, because of his minimal use of sulfur, they are still a very exciting new addition to a region that has been in serious need of a new addition for quite some time. I hope, if the wines do not prove to be as ageworthy as they should be in the coming years, that the estate will consider using a bit more SO<sub>2</sub> in their élevage of the wines, to ensure that these magical young wines reach a majestic old age!*

## **2011 Nacimiento- Avan (Juan Manuel Burgos)**

The 2011 Nacimiento from Juan Manuel Burgos' Avan bodega is made entirely from tempranillo and comes in at fourteen percent octane in this vintage. The wine comes from the younger vines in Señor Manuel's vineyards and is aged for twelve months in a mix of new and older French *Barricas*. The 2011 offers up a fine bouquet of plums, pomegranate, a touch of chocolate, a nice base of soil and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and velvety on the attack, with a good core, but with some uncovered oak tannins sticking out a bit on the finish, taking away a bit of length and elegance from the backend. The oak tannins here are a fairly bitter on the finish, and I suspect that they will never be adequately absorbed into the body of the wine. Given that these are younger vines, it seems to me that the prudent course for the *elevage* would be to only utilize used barrels in the future. There are some very fine raw materials here, but the sloppy wood work gets in the way. 2014-2019+? **83.**

## **2011 Viñedo del Torrubio- Avan (Juan Manuel Burgos)**

The Viñedo del Torrubio from Avan is the top of the line bottling from the bodega, which is made from sixty-five year-old tempranillo vines planted in the Torrubio vineyard, and the wine is then aged for eighteen months entirely in new French oak. The 2011 version tips the scales at 14.5 percent alcohol, but manages its octane quite well on the nose, offering up scents

of black cherries, plums, cocoa powder, violets, a touch of woodsmoke and gently spicy, new French wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and impressively plush and focused on the attack, with a fine core of fruit, but with some overt heat on the backend. There is better stuffing here than in the Nacimiento bottling, due to the much older vines, which cover the oak tannins a bit better on the backend, but there are also more wood tannins here from the combination of higher alcohol (which leeches more into solution) and the one hundred percent new wood, so in the end, the additional stuffing from those fine old vines is lost trying to carry the wood tannins- unsuccessfully I might add. Pick these grapes at fourteen percent potential alcohol and raise the wine entirely in older wood, and this would be a smoking bottle of wine, but as it is, it is just another slightly rigid, borderline overripe wine from Ribera del Duero. 2016-2020+? **86.**

#### **2011 Viña Gormaz Vendimia Seleccionada**

The 2011 Vendimia Seleccionada from Viña Gormaz is produced from tempranillo vines that are over fifty years of age and fermented and aged in cement tanks, seeing no wood prior to bottling. The wine is fourteen percent alcohol and sadly, is sealed with a plastic cork, which means it will need to be drunk young. The bouquet is a mix of jammy black cherries, dried eucalyptus, dark chocolate and woodsmoke. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, four-square and chewy, with a good core, a fair bit of backend tannin and good length and grip on the reasonably balanced finish. This is not particularly complex, and does show its octane just a bit on the backend, but the wine is also inexpensive, and for those who are looking for some muscle at a lower price point, it has some merits. But, charming and complex it is not. 2014-2018. **86.**

#### **2010 Hacienda Monasterio**

The 2010 Hacienda Monasterio tips the scales at a hefty fifteen percent alcohol and is a blend of eighty-five percent tempranillo, ten percent cabernet sauvignon and five percent merlot. The bouquet offers up a stewy, simplistic, overripe mosh pit of raspberry *eaux de vie*, coffee grounds and spicy new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, jammy and hot, with coarse tannins, no focus and a dry, astringent and sand paper-like finish of stewed fruit, raw wood tannins and alcohol. Did I miss something in this most disagreeable wine? 2014-2014. **73.**

#### **2010 Viña Pedrosa Crianza**

Viña Pedrosa is currently one of my absolute favorite estates in Ribera del Duero, but their 2010 Crianza is a bit riper than their lovely 2008 (please see below), as it tips the scales at a full fourteen percent alcohol, and is considerably riper and more marked by its new oak than its 2008 counterpart as a result. The wine is quite well-done in its riper, oakier style, offering up scents of plums, chocolate, nutmeg, black cherries and plenty of lead pencil-like new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and chewy, with a good core of fruit, some uncovered oak tannins poking out on the backend (having leached into solution at a fairly brisk rate from the higher alcohol level of the wine in 2010), and just a wisp of alcohol as well. The wood tannins here give the wine a slight bitterness on the finish that will probably never go away, and though the alcohol is pretty well managed and the wine does not show any overtly overripe aromatics or flavors, it has flaws from its octane level that will probably make it most enjoyable to drink in its youth- preferably with a fatty red meat that will obviate some of the bitterness from the uncovered oak. 2014-2020? **84.**

#### **2010 Tinto Pesquera**

The 2010 Pesquera purports to only be fourteen percent alcohol on the label- which would be pretty low these days for Ribera del Duero- but to my nose and palate it seems a bit



higher than that number. The nose offers up a sappy blend of plums, black cherries, chocolate, fresh nutmeg and a generous coating of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and plush on the attack, with a good, sweet core and a fair bit of dry, oak-derived tannins poking out on the backend and adding coarseness and a dry edge to the long finish. Like so many wines done in this style, there will be a race between the fruit and the dry oak tannins on the backend, and it is likely that this pumped up fruit component will depart for the next world long before the oak tannins soften. I suspect that the 2010 Pesquara tastes exactly as the winemaking team here desired, but I wonder why they would prefer this overripe and overtly oaky style to their own classics from twenty years ago? This is okay wine (lord knows I have tasted worse in preparation for this report!), but with the heritage of Pesquara, one cannot help but be a bit depressed tasting the 2010 vintage here. 2016-2025+? **86+**.

#### **2010 Finca el Peruco- Goyo Garcia Viadero**

Goyo Garcia Viadero's Finca el Peruco is planted to eighty-five percent Tempranillo and fifteen percent Albillo, with the vineyards in excess of eighty years of age and sitting at a thousand meters above sea level on a bed of clay and limestone. The wine is fermented in old *foudres* and then raised in even older barrels prior to bottling, with no added SO<sub>2</sub>. The 2010 Finca el Peruco comes in at a very reasonable 13.5 percent alcohol and offers up a pure and complex nose of mulberries, red plums, cocoa powder, vinesmoke, a lovely base of soil tones and a potpourri of spice tones that include saffron, nutmeg and cardamom. On the palate the wine is fullish, pure and very transparent, with a lovely core of fruit, superb intensity of flavor, moderate, skin tannins and a very long, complex and light on its feet finish. An outstanding wine. 2018-2040. **93**.

#### **2009 Condado de Haza**

I used to really like this wine from Alejandro Fernández, but it had probably been a decade since I last tasted a vintage of Condado de Haza. The wine in the 2009 vintage is very, very ripe at 14.5 percent alcohol, and all the fine winemaking underneath the heat cannot make up for the fact that these grapes were picked too late to make a good wine. The bouquet is really quite stylish and attractive- particularly for its octane level- offering up scents of sappy black cherries, plums, chocolate syrup, a bit of apricot and plenty of well-done, new French oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and overripe, with low acids, very modest complexity, a good core and a long, dry-edged and hot finish that closes bitter and unbalanced. Mediocre juice from a former winemaking master in Ribera del Duero. 2014-2019. **84**.

#### **2009 Hacienda Monasterio**

I assume that the 2009 Hacienda Monasterio is made up of a similar *cépages* to the 2010 vintage, and the wine comes in at the same hefty fifteen percent alcohol. The results of this winemaking by rote are similar to the egregiously poor 2010 version, but, perhaps a year's worth of bottle age have mellowed the carnage, as the bouquet is a simple mix of stewy raspberries and red plums, chocolate, a bit of peanut butter (from bottle age?), coffee grounds and new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, flaccid and a bit hot, with an overripe personality, moderate, raw wood tannins, zero acids or focus and a long, overripe and utterly dulled finish. I like this better than the 2010 version, but that does not equate into an endorsement for this ill-considered, stewy wine. If the whole world consisted of wines like this, I could be a teetotaler in a week! 2014-2018. **78**.

### **2009 Viña Pedrosa “La Navilla”**

The 2009 La Navilla from Viña Pedrosa is also one of the riper wines I have tasted from the bodega, coming in at fourteen percent alcohol, but the wine better manages its ripeness level than the 2010 Crianza and shows no signs of uncovered wood tannins and only the faintest whisper of backend heat. The bouquet is quite elegant in its constellation of cherries, red plums, cocoa, fresh nutmeg and smoky new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and again quite refined in its profile, with a lovely core of fruit, fine focus and grip, and a long, fairly tannic and chewy finish. There are some wood tannins on the backend here as well, but they are quite well buffered by fruit and I do not have the same sense here as in the 2010 Crianza, that the wood poses any problem. Of course, I would find this even more interesting with less new wood and lower octane, as one senses (rather than tastes or smells) some lovely *terroir* lurking here. It is a good wine that could use a few years in the cellar to absorb its oak tannins, as they are a bit too chewy today for primetime drinking. The wine should age pretty well. 2019-2035. **89.**

### **2009 Viña Pedrosa Reserva**

The 2009 Viña Pedrosa Reserva is aged fully two years in barrel prior to bottling, and like the La Navilla from this same year, it too comes in at a full fourteen percent alcohol. This is my favorite of the riper wines from the bodega, as it offers up a deep, complex and mellowed bouquet of red and black cherries, plums, cocoa powder, lead pencil and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and quite refined, with a good core of fruit, moderate tannins (some again from the oak) and very good length and grip on the focused and well-balanced finish. Less new wood here would produce an even better wine, but this is well-balanced, complex and carries its wood pretty well on the backend and will be a lovely drink in another year or two. 2015-2035+. **92.**

### **2009 Celeste Crianza- Selección de Torres (Ribera del Duero)**

The 2009 Celeste from Torres is a bit on the safe, international side of the ledger, and does not really show a whole lot of Ribera character. The nose is perfectly acceptable in its almost anonymous mélange of red and black cherries, a hint of spice, chocolate and a bit of slightly resinous new wood. On the palate the wine is fullish, suave and velvety, with perfectly respectable depth, gentle tannins and a reasonably long, simple finish that shows just a touch of backend heat. This is just too safe to show any real character, though the wine is certainly drinkable. 2012-2020. **84.**

### **2009 Finca Valdeolmos- Goyo Garcia Viadero**

The 2009 Finca Valdeolmos farmed by Goyo Garcia Viadero is not quite as high in elevation as the Finca el Peruco, as the vineyard lies at about 850 meters above sea level. It too is planted to an old vine (more than eighty years of age) field mix of ninety percent Tempranillo and ten percent Albillo, which Señor Garcia of course ferments together. This too is a cool Ribera del Duero, coming in at 13.5 percent alcohol and offering up a superb aromatic constellation of red and black cherries, raw cocoa, fresh nutmeg, a touch of wild fennel (from the white grape Albillo?), beautifully complex soil tones and a bit of graphite in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and tangy, with a sappy core of fruit, excellent soil signature, a slight touch of volatile acidity and a very long, ripely tannic and very complex finish. This needs some time to really blossom, but it is going to be terrific. 2019-2040. **93+.**

### **2009 Viñas de Anguix- Goyo Garcia Viadero**

The Viñas de Anguix is a bit of an outlier for Señor Garcia, as this vineyard is planted entirely to Tempranillo and is only fifty-six years of age. The wine is treated a bit differently in

the cellar as result- still being fermented with indigenous yeasts in old *foudres*, but then being raised in French *Barricas* that are only four to five years old. The 2009 is again 13.5 percent alcohol and the wine is outstanding, with a much more “typical” Ribera del Duero bouquet of black cherries, red plums, cocoa powder, fresh nutmeg, lovely soil tones and a judicious touch of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and elegant, with a fine core of fruit, great focus and grip, ripe, well-integrated tannins and outstanding balance on the long, complex and very pure finish. This wine actually reminds me very strongly of the first wines I tasted from Ribera del Duero back in the early 1980s, and it takes me back to a time when I understood all the excitement about this region’s wines! Great juice. 2020-2040+. **94+**.

### **2008 Viña Pedrosa Crianza**

The 2008 Viña Pedrosa Crianza is a lovely wine that is fairly low in octane for this region, coming in at 13.5 percent and it really has retained a lovely sense of elegance as a result. The bouquet is bright and starting to develop some secondary layers of complexity in its constellation of black cherries, red plums, a touch of coconut, a nice base of soil, hints of fresh nutmeg, wild fennel and a deft framing of new oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, suave and elegant, with good, but not great depth at the core, moderate tannins and very good length and grip on the focused finish. Some folks may miss a bit of mid-palate amplitude here with the lower octane, but to my palate, this is a very fair trade-off for the purity and focus that this wine has in spades. A bit of the tannin on the backend is from the wood and may always be part of the profile of the wine, but all in all, this is a very well-done example. 2014-2025. **90**.

### **2007 Viña Pedrosa “La Navilla”**

The 2007 Viña Pedrosa “La Navilla” bottling is a bit cooler than its 2009 counterpart, coming in at 13.5 percent alcohol, and the wine is better as a result. This is a very, very fine example of Ribera del Duero, wafting from the glass in a fine *mélange* of plums, cherries, lovely spice tones redolent of mace and nutmeg, cocoa powder, a gentle base of soil and a well-measured dose of spicy new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite suave on the attack, with a plump core, moderate tannins and fine length and grip on the nascently complex finish. I really like this wine and wish there were more examples of Ribera del Duero these days at this lower octane. 2014-2030. **92**.

### **2006 Dehesa La Granja**

The 2006 Dehesa La Granja from Alejandro Fernández wins the award for his recent wines that I tasted, as this one comes in at a full fifteen percent alcohol. The vines here are young, at the newest of Señor Fernandez’s three bodegas in Ribera, as the vineyards were only planted in 1998. At fifteen percent, it is self-evident that the wine is overripe, but the bouquet is really quite nice for such a ripe wine, offering up scents of baked black cherries, boysenberry, eucalyptus, chocolate syrup and plenty of spicy and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, velvety and sweet on the attack, with a respectable (but, by no means concentrated) core, modest tannins and a long, tannic and hot finish. Again, the higher octane has leached more wood tannins into this wine than is good for its health, and these are not going anywhere, so it is probably better to drink this wine in the near future, as its balance will become more questionable as time goes by. 2014-2020? **85**.

## ***Txakoli***

### **2013 Getariako-Txakolina- Antxiola**

Having never been to Bilbao or had the pleasure to visit the vineyards that surround it, I am not particularly familiar with either the producers or the grape varieties that hold hegemony in this northerly region of Basque country, but I certainly know a spectacular white wine value when I taste one! The 2013 Getariako-Txakolina from Antxiola is a blend of ninety percent Hondurrabi Zuri and ten percent Hondurrabi Beltza- two indigenous grapes to the region- and is fermented and raised in stainless steel. The resulting wine is stunningly good in 2013, jumping from the glass in an excellent aromatic blend of lime peel, green apple sea salts, wild fennel and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is medium-full, crisp and beautifully defined by its complex minerality, with a very good core of fruit, lovely balance, bright acids and outstanding length and grip on the zesty finish. This is a gorgeous middleweight that is absolutely ideal for the warm summer months, and insanely inexpensive! 2014-2016. **90.**

### **2011 Getariako-Txakolina- Bengoetxe**

The 2011 Getariako-Txakolina from Bengoetxe is a lovely wine that remains fresh as a daisy at age three and shows no signs of slowing down anytime soon, though it is starting to develop some lovely secondary layers of aromatics. The bright and complex nose offers up scents of lime, tart pear, salty soil tones, gentle notes of green olive, wild fennel and a Chablis-like topnote of straw. On the palate the wine is medium-full, complex and beautifully balanced, with fine framing acids, a superb core and a long, complex and wide open finish. A fine bottle at its apogee. 2014-2016. **89.**

## ***Canary Islands***

### **2012 Tendal Blanco Tradición- Constancio Ballesteros Magán (La Palma)**

Tendal Blanco Tradición is made from a blend of old vine Albillo (sixty to eighty years of age) and a bit of Listan Blanco, planted in high altitude, volcanic soils on the northern side of the island of La Palma. The wine is made by the husband and wife team of Nancy Castro and Constancio Ballesteros, who are both trained oenologists and returned in 1997 to Nancy's home island of La Palma and began to rehabilitate her family vineyards and set down roots on the island. It is made very naturally, with no extraction enzymes, artificial yeasts and only a modicum of SO<sub>2</sub>, fermented and aged in stainless steel until bottling. The 2012 Tendal Blanco offers up a lovely bouquet of green olive, tart peach, lovely wild herb tones, a touch of fern, hints of beeswax and citrus peel. On the palate the wine is medium-bodied, bright and well-balanced, with a fine core of fruit, fine framing acids and lovely length and grip on the complex and focused finish. I really like the savory elements here, which work beautifully at the table. 2014-2016. **88.**

## ***Navarra***

### **2012 Garnacha- Lurra**

The 2012 Garnacha from Lurra is an excellent value. The wine comes in at 13.5 percent octane and is raised entirely stainless steel tanks and sees no oak aging whatsoever. The bright and complex nose wafts from the glass in a mix of red and black raspberries, chocolate, *garrigue*, a nice base of soil tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and youthfully complex, with a good core, still a bit of tannin to resolve and a long, palate-staining finish. It is so nice to taste Garnacha that is not overripe and overwrought! 2014-2020. **88.**



### ***La Mancha***

#### **2009 El Vínculo- Alejandro Fernández (La Mancha)**

The 2009 El Vínculo from Alejandro Fernández's La Mancha estate, tips the scales at 14.5 percent alcohol and offers up the predictably overripe, simple and slightly stewy aromatic profile of jammy red and black cherries, chocolate, gingerbread and raw new wood. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, simple and unbalanced, with a modest core of fruit, firm, oak-derived tannins and a dry-edged, four-square and astringent finish. There is simply nowhere near the sufficient stuffing of wine to carry the new wood, and the wine is already imploding at age five. Maybe, if these young vines were raised in three or four year-old barrels, they would stand a chance of counter-balancing the wood tannins, but as it is, this wine is just absurdly out of balance and already knocking on heaven's door. 2014-2014. **76.**

### ***Vino de la Tierra Ribera del Jiloca***

#### **2011 Garnacha "Xiloca"- Bodegas Vinae Mureri (Vino de la Tierra Ribera del Jiloca)**

The 2011 Garnacha "Xiloca" from Bodegas Vinae Mureri comes in at fourteen percent alcohol and is sealed under a black plastic cork, which is long on style points (to go with the svelte black label), but probably not doing any favors to the wine's potential longevity. Ironically, given plastic corks penchant for early and frequent oxygen ingress, the nose on the 2011 Xiloca Garnacha is quite reduced, but with air eventually offers up scents of dark berries,

charred wood, coffee grounds, a bit of spiced meats, pepper and some cedary wood. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, reasonably complex and rock solid at the core, with some chewy, almost gritty tannins perking up the finish, good alcohol balance, and just a bit of permanent reduction locked in on the backend which gives the wine a slightly sulfurous closing note of burnt matchstick. Did this go in the bottle purposely reductive to counteract the oxidative tendencies of its closure? There are clearly some good raw materials here, but they seem to have been lost. 2014-2018+? **84.**

### ***Blancos Catalunya***

#### **2013 Blanc Selecció- Huguet de Can Feixes**

The 2013 Blanc Selecció from Huguet de Can Feixes is comprised of a very interesting blend of forty percent Parellada, thirty percent Macabeu, twenty percent Chardonnay and ten percent Malvasia (of which the estate is quite unique in having planted in the Penedès). The wine comes in at a cool twelve percent alcohol, nicely reflecting the cooler microclimate of this area in the Penedès. The bouquet offers up a complex blend of tart orange, grapefruit, chalky minerality, wild fennel, lime peel and ocean breeze. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with crisp acids, lovely backend mineral drive and a long, complex and classy finish. This is a really lovely bottle from one of Spain's finest producers. 2014-2016.

**92.**

#### **2011 Els Amelers- Lafou Cellars (Terra Alta)**

The Els Amelers bottling from Lafou Cellars is comprised entirely of garnaxta blanca and comes in at thirteen percent octane. I have not had other wines from Lafou Cellars, but I was quite impressed with the quality of their 2011 Els Amelers bottling, which delivers a fine nose of lemon, green apple, sea salts, a nice touch of Catalàn herb tones and a bit of green olive in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite minerally in personality, with fine focus and mid-palate intensity, crisp acids and a very long, complex finish that closes with a nice note of citrus peel. Fine juice. 2013-2016. **90.**

#### **2011 Blanc de Gresa- Vinyas Olivardots (Empordà- Costa Brava)**

The 2011 Blanc de Gresa from Vinyas Olivardots is made up of a blend of fifty percent white grenache, thirty percent grey grenache and twenty percent white carifèna, and comes in at an even thirteen percent alcohol. This has typically been one of my favorite white wines produced in Catalunya and the 2011 is another very strong bottle, offering up a very lovely and quite complex bouquet of pear, lime, lavender, salty white soil tones, wild fennel, orange zest and a nice touch of bergamot in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and nicely defined by its soil component, with a fine core, excellent focus and grip and a long, classy finish. Very refined wine. 2013-2018+. **92.**

#### **2011 Xarel-lo "Calcari"- Parès Baltà (Penedès)**

The 2011 Xarel-lo "Calcari" from Parès Baltà is a lovely and cool example of the varietal, coming in at an even twelve percent alcohol and delivering a lovely bouquet of pear, green olive, beeswax, salty white soil tones and dried flowers. On the palate the wine is medium-full, complex and beautifully balanced, with a lovely core of fruit, sound framing acids and lovely length and grip on the complex and classy finish. I have had this sample in my cellar for more than a year, and it has aged beautifully during the time that I lost it down there, and is now drinking at its peak of maturity. It will continue to cruise along nicely for a couple more years and really is a lovely example of Xarel-lo. 2014-2016. **89.**

**2010 Camino Blanco- Terro Remota (Empordà- Costa Brava)**

This is another wine from the Spanish Artisan Wine Group that I reported on two years ago, and the wine has aged beautifully and it is quite clear that I underrated it a bit back then. Readers may recall that Terra Remota is owned by the husband and wife team of Marc and Emma Bournazeau, who are residents of Perpignan, France (just over the border), as Marc's family was forced to emigrate from Spain to Perpignan during the Civil War. The wine is a blend of forty-five percent Garnaxta Blanco, thirty-five percent Chenin Blanc and twenty percent Chardonnay. The 2010 has blossomed beautifully with bottle age and now offers up scents of lemon, green apple, sandy soil tones, white peach, sea salts and white flowers in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and quite complex, with a fine core, bright acids and lovely length and grip on the focused and light on its feet finish. I liked this wine quite well two years ago, but it is even better than I imagined with some bottle age. 2014-2017+. **90.**

**2009 Clos d'Agon Blanco (Empordà- Costa Brava)**

The white wine from Clos d'Agon is comprised of a blend of Viognier, Marsanne and Roussanne and the wine tips the scales at fourteen percent alcohol. The nose on the 2009 is quite good, as it nicely weaves its generous base of vanillin oak into classic white Rhône aromatics of peach, acacia blossom, orange peel and sandy soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite pleasant on the attack, with good focus and core, solid framing acids, but a bit of uncovered heat on the backend that really mars what could have been a very good wine if it were a half or a full percent lower in alcohol. As it is, the wine finished a bit bitter on the backend from the heat and really is not first class, despite its solid complexity and interesting bouquet. Too bad. 2013-2016. **84.**

***Cataluña Tinto*****2012 Vespres- Celler Dosterras (Montsant)**

The 2012 Vespres from Celler Dosterras is comprised of a blend of Garnaxta and Samso (Carignan) and tips the scales at a heady 14.5 percent alcohol. The wine offers up a ripe and jammy nose of black raspberries, marinated black cherries, hung game, a bit of pepper and coffee grounds. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and actually shows some structural integrity on the attack, with a good core, a nice bit of acidity, chewy tannins and some overt alcohol on the hot, bitter and coarse finish. This is too high in alcohol for its own good and really is quite ponderous on the palate as a result. 2014-2019. **84.**

**2011 Tempranillo- Albet i Noya (Penedès)**

The 2011 Tempranillo from Albet i Noya is a ripe and tasty bottle for near-term drinking, and though it is not the most complex of bottles, there is a lot to like here. The plush nose offers up scents of cherries, pomegranate, a touch of sarsaparilla, chocolate, gentle smokiness and a topnote of lavender. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, suave and wide open on the attack, with a good core, modest tannins and really quite nice transparency on the long and succulent finish. A very good everyday bottle for drinking over the next five or six years. 2014-2020. **87.**

**2011 Cigonyes Negre- Castillo Perelada (Empordà- Costa Brava)**

The new line of Cigonyes bottlings from Castillo Perelada takes its name from the white storks that nest at the castle (Cigonyes is the Catalàn name for these graceful birds), and the red wine Cigonyes is comprised of ninety percent syrah and ten percent assorted grapes planted in the vineyard. Like many of the recent Castillo Perelada reds I have tasted, this is a touch too ripe for my tastes and a bit too new oaky as well, with the underlying wine clearly outstanding and



only in need of a bit more restraint to be exceptional. The ripe nose offers up a complex blend of red and black cherries, coffee bean, a bit of charred wood, dark soil tones and plenty of spicy new French oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and rock solid at the core, with ripe tannins and a bit of uncovered alcohol poking out on the long, but pretty oaky finish. The raw materials here are excellent, now the wine just has to be reined in a bit stylistically to hit the big time. 2015-2030. **88.**

#### **2011 EOS Syrah- Loxarel (Penedès)**

The 2011 EOS Syrah from Loxarel is grown at one of their higher altitude vineyards in Penedès, on a steep and stony slope located six hundred meters above sea level. The wine tips the scales at 14.5 percent alcohol, undergoes malo in barrel, though the oak for this bottling is Hungarian in origin, rather than French. The 2011 offers up a ripe and slightly weedy nose of cassis, herb tones, pepper, coffee grounds and slightly sawdusty new wood. On the palate the wine is fullish, youthful and not particularly plush for its octane, with a bit of a dip in the mid-palate, some modest backend tannins and a fairly short and compact finish. There are some pyrazine overtones here that are not overly inviting, and the wine really seems surprisingly pinched for its ripeness level. It is okay, but it either needs some more time to blossom, or was stillborn. 2016-2025? **82-87+?**

#### **2011 Mas Sorrer (Montsant)**

The 2011 Mas Sorrer is comprised of a blend of cabernet sauvignon, syrah and merlot and tips the scales at 14.5 percent alcohol. The wine is a bit jammy on the nose, but also shows a lovely sense of elegance to its blend of roasted cassis, Catalàn *garrigue*, a bit of charred wood, chicory, dark soil tones and a touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a good core of fruit, the aforementioned jamminess of the nose continuing on the palate, ripe tannins and very good length and grip on the slightly hot finish. This is a good wine and a good value, but it would take a significant step up at slightly lower octane, as there are clearly some good things going on here, but it is just a touch too ripe for its own good. 2014-2017+? **86.**

#### **2010 Garnaxta “Hisenda Miret”- Parès Baltà (Penedès)**

The 2010 Garnaxta from the vineyard of Hisenda Miret is one of Parès Baltà small, single vineyard bottlings. The wine is aged for five months in a combination of new and one year-old French barrels and the 2010 vintage tips the scales at 14.5 percent alcohol. The wine offers up a nose of ripe red and black raspberries, a bit of hung game, chocolate, *garrigue*, gentle peppery overtones and soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and peppery, with lovely mineral drive, ripe, well-integrated tannins, a rock solid core and impressive detail and balance on the very long, moderately tannic and soil-driven finish. This is really an impressive bottle of grenache that shows no signs of *sur maturité* and is really very surprisingly defined by its underlying minerality and is quite light on its feet for its octane. Very impressive juice. 2016-2030+. **92.**

#### **2010 Els Escurçons- Mas Martinet (Priorat)**

The Els Escurçons bottling from Sara Pérez at Mas Martinet is comprised of one hundred percent garnaxta and the 2010 vintage tips the scales at fifteen percent alcohol. The wine is plenty ripe, with some overt heat on the backend, but in the context of these heady wines, this one manages its alcohol pretty well. The bouquet is very ripe, but not aggressively overripe in profile, offering up notes of jammy raspberries, pepper, *garrigue*, dusty soil tones, peanut shells

and spicy new wood. On the palate the wine is big, bold and very ripe, with a good core, an impressive stony soil component, coarse, chewy tannins and very good length and grip on the modestly hot finish. This needs a handful of years to shed some tannic clout, but seems reasonably well-balanced and the odds are probably above fifty percent that it will actually resolve its tannins before it dries out, though what role the fifteen percent alcohol will play in the wine down the road is anyone's guess- my own instinct tells me it will become more prevalent in the balance of the wine as time goes by and eventually prove to be its Achilles' Heel. 2019-2029? 87+?

#### **2010 Clos Martinet- Mas Martinet (Priorat)**

The 2010 Clos Martinet is plenty ripe at 14.5 percent alcohol, though this is pretty average for the wines of Priorat. According to the back label the blend on the 2010 is fifty-eight percent garnaxta, eighteen percent cariñena, twelve percent syrah and ten percent cabernet sauvignon (with the non-mentioned other two percent perhaps merlot?) and the wine offers up a jammy, buxom bouquet of raspberry preserves, coffee, a touch of prune, hung game, some damp herb tones and plenty of spicy new wood. On the palate the wine is big, ripe and jammy, with a firm core, chewy tannins and a long, fairly coarse, heavy and heady finish that impressively manages to subsume its alcohol very well in the body of the wine. The tannins are dry-edged from the oak, but pretty well-integrated at the same time, and given the high-wire act that the wine has to do at this ripeness level, it really is pretty well-balanced. But, the combination of the jammy and unstructured nature of the very ripe palate and the coarseness of the tannins here is not a combination that would make me want to even finish the first glass of this wine, despite the fact that it has managed to keep its constituent components pretty well knit together. 2016-2025+? 86.

#### **2010 Pasanau "Ceps Nous" (Priorat)**

The 2010 Pasanau "Ceps Nous" is a pretty standard offering from Priorat, tipping the scales at 14.5 percent alcohol and being comprised of a blend of seventy percent garnaxta, fifteen percent cabernet sauvignon, ten percent merlot and five percent syrah. Happily, the wine is raised mostly in older French oak barrels. The ripe bouquet on the 2010 offers up scents of raspberries, cherries, *garrigue*, coffee, a hint of peanut butter, stony soil tones and still a bit of oak spice from its older barrels. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and impressively complex, with a fine core, firm, coarse tannins and a long, slightly hot, focused and chewy finish. This manages its alcohol content very well indeed, only showing a bit of backend heat, but the wine is so structurally coarse that it is really not particularly enjoyable to drink today, and the track record for wines at this octane is pretty clear- once the puppy fat of fruit fades, the high alcohol becomes more and more prominent. This is okay, but hardly a wine I would want to drink today or put in my cellar and roll the dice with for down the road. Just methodologically challenged juice from the outset, it seems to me. 2016-2019+? 85.

#### **2010 Finca de la Garriga- Castillo Perelada (Empordà- Costa Brava)**

The Finca de la Garriga vineyard of Castillo Perelada is a flat, alluvial soil blend of clay, sand and limestone, and it is home to the oldest vines that the bodega owns- forty to fifty year-old plantings of Garnaxta and Cariñena. The sample of the 2010 arrived to my office from the bodega without finished labels, so I am not sure how high the octane is on this wine, but I would guess we are in the 14.5 percent range again. The wine pushes the threshold of *sur maturité*, without every crossing the line, as it offers up a fine bouquet of sappy cassis and black cherries, lead pencil, French roast, Catalàn herb tones and toasty new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and plush at the core, with lovey focus, ripe tannins and excellent length

and grip on the well-balanced finish. Fine juice in the riper style so *a la mode* in Empordà today. 2016-2030. **91+**.



*Beautiful terraced vineyards clinging precipitously to the mountainsides in Priorat.*

### **2010 Spanish Quarter (Costers del Segre)**

There was not much information on this wine's label- not even the name of the producer- but the wine is quite good despite its reticence about origins. The 2010 is a blend of fifty-five percent cabernet sauvignon and forty-five percent tempranillo and tips the scales at 13.5 percent alcohol, and yet stays quite cool in the mouth. The lovely, ripe nose offers up scents of black cherries, eucalyptus, chocolate, a touch of wild fennel and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely plush on the attack, with a good core, still a touch of tannin and a long, velvety finish. This is fairly modern in style, but fairly discreet in personality in this idiom. 2014-2020+. **88.**

### **2010 Terral- Sumarroca (Penedès)**

The Terral bottling from Bodegas Sumarroca is made primarily from old vine syrah, augmented by small percentages of cabernet sauvignon, merlot and cabernet franc. The 2010 is fourteen percent in alcohol and is a very fine bottle, offering up a black fruity bouquet of blackberries, espresso, woodsmoke, dark soil tones, violets, a bit of chicory and a gentle framing of cedary new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and impressively light on its feet for its octane, with a fine core, ripe tannins and excellent length and grip on the complex finish.

This is quite drinkable today, but will also age well for at least the next dozen years. Good juice. 2014-2025+. **92.**

**2009 Viña Laia- Albet i Noya (Penedès)**

The 2009 “Viña Laia” from Albet i Noya is a lovely bottle of wine, made up of a blend of sixty-five percent Garnaxta, twenty percent Cariñena and fifteen percent Cabernet Sauvignon. The wine comes in at an even fourteen percent alcohol, but manages its octane with great style and shows no signs of heat or overripe aromatics. The fine, complex nose wafts from the glass in a mix of black cherries, chicory, woodsmoke, coffee bean, dark soil tones and Catalàn *garrigue*. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and plump on the attack, with fine balance, a succulent core of fruit, nice soil notes and a long, focused and modestly tannic finish that closes with fine grip and complexity. A very good wine that is starting to drink very well, but should cruise along for many years. 2014-2030+. **90.**

**2009 Giné & Giné- Buil & Giné (Priorat)**

The 2009 Giné & Giné is comprised of a blend of forty percent Garnaxta and sixty percent Cariñena and comes in at an even fourteen percent alcohol. The wine is starting to show some nice secondary layers to its aromatic complexity at age five, wafting from the glass in a blend of raspberries, *garrigue*, spice tones, smoked meats, coffee, pepper, cedar and slate soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still fairly chewy, with a good core, fine focus and balance, a fair bit of tannin still to resolve, tangy acids and just a bit of backend heat on the nicely focused finish. This is still adolescent and needs more bottle age to blossom, but it is a very nicely made wine and should be very good in the fullness of time. 2018-2035+. **92.**

**2009 Mas Martinet “Degustació Number 7” (Priorat)**

The 2009 “Degustació Number 7” from Sara Pérez’s Mas Martinet is an experimental wine that was made entirely from younger vine Cariñena and aged in new wood. It is 14.8 percent alcohol and offers up a borderline overripe nose of marinated black cherries, coffee grounds, charred wood, damp, dark soil tones and a fairly generous base of spicy new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and jammy on the attack, with a good core, a bit of fiery wood tannins and plenty of heat roughing up the heady finish. To my palate, this is decidedly uninteresting and ill-conceived. I imagine that this wine will simply dry out from its wood tannins and high octane with bottle age, so drink it through the chewy tannins now, rather than waiting for it to implode. 2014-2017+? **80.**

**2008 Camí de Cormes “Vinyes Centenàries” Samsó- Celler Roig Parals (Empordà)**

The 2008 Camí de Cormes “Vinyes Centenàries” Samsó (or Carignan) from Celler Roig Parals is quite ripe, though I am not certain of the exact alcohol content of the 2008, as this is a sample that was sent directly from the bodega and does not have finished labeling on the bottle. I noticed several citations of the 2007 tipping the scales at a full fifteen percent alcohol, but the 2008 version seems a touch less heady than that! The wine is quite good in 2008, offering up a deep and complex nose of baked blackberries, chicory, lovely, dark soil tones, woodsmoke, a bit of coffee grounds, gentle notes of Catalàn *garrigue* and a quite judicious framing of cedary wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, plump and very well-balanced, with a fine core of fruit, lovely complexity, modest tannins and very good length and grip on the focused and quite classy finish. If this is close to the same octane as its 2007 counterpart, then it manages its ripeness extremely well, as there are no signs of overt heat or overripeness here, albeit pretty low acidity. 2014-2025. **89.**

**2008 Gratavinum GV5 (Priorat)**

The 2008 Gratavinum GV5 is a blend of Garnaxta, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cariñena and Syrah and is aged in a combination of French and Hungarian oak. The wine tips the scales at 14.5 percent and offers up a ripe nose of raspberries, black cherries, balsamic overtones, chocolate, a touch of soil, fresh rosemary and nicely understated, spicy new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite glossy on the attack, with good complexity, ripe tannins and a bit of backend jamminess on the long finish. With air, the tannins here get grittier and the wine loses a bit of its structural elegance, but handles its octane pretty well and is never overtly hot. Good, solid Priorat. 2017-2035. **89.**

**2008 Gratavinum 2πR (Priorat)**

The 2008 “2πR” bottling from Gratavinum is also a blend of Garnaxta, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cariñena and Syrah, but as the name implies, the estate seeks to make this a “rounder” wine that will be more accessible early on. Consequently, they raise the wine in a combination of new and one year-old barrels to try and tame the wood tannins a bit, but the '08 is still 14.5 percent in alcohol and has sacrificed some precision as a result. The nose is quite black fruity in its mélange of black cherries, cassis, woodsmoke. *Garrigue*, coffee grounds and spicy oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, overripe and simple, with a fat core, some chewy backend tannins and a four-square, blurry finish. There are no signs of overt heat on the backend, which is impressive, but this wine is overripe and not as interesting as the GV5 bottling from the bodega. 2014-2030. **83.**

**2008 +7 Mas Blanc- Pinord (Priorat)**

The 2008 +7 Mas Blanc is made up of a blend of cabernet sauvignon, garnaxta and syrah and tips the scales at 14.5 percent alcohol. It is one of the best examples of Priorat I have tasted in a couple of years, as it very nicely manages its ripeness level and keeps its balance and structural integrity. The deep and complex nose wafts from the glass in a mix of red and black raspberries, *garrigue*, grilled meats, coffee, a lovely base of stony soil tones and a discreet base of new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and extremely well-balanced, with ripe, well-integrated tannins, fine focus and a very long, classy finish. Fine juice. 2018-2035. **93.**

**2007 Abadal Selecció- Bodegas Abadal (Pla de Bages)**

I tasted this wine two years ago during my visit to the winery, and it was one of my least favorites from this fine, up and coming estate. The reason is that this wine is raised in one hundred percent new wood (a mix of French and Slavonian oak) and is quite ripe in style, and two additional years of bottle age have not really helped it mellow any. The *cépage* is a very unique blend of forty percent Cabernet Sauvignon, thirty-five percent Cabernet Franc, fifteen percent Syrah and five percent each of the indigenous grapes of Surmoll and Mandó. The 2007 Seleccio is showing its alcohol a bit more today than was the case two years ago, wafting from the glass in a ripe and new oaky mélange of black cherries, coffee grounds, a touch of hay and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, buxom and low acid, with a good core, modest tannins and the alcohol now starting to poke out a bit uncovered on the long finish. Abadal is producing several really good wines these days, but as is the case in many Spanish wineries today, their biggest and most expensive wine is not their most interesting. 2014-2019. **87.**

### **2007 Finca La Milana- Albet i Noya (Penedès)**

The single vineyard bottling of La Milana from Albet i Noya is made up of a blend of Tempranillo, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Caladoc, with the 2007 coming in at a pretty ripe 14.5 percent alcohol, which is probably just a touch higher than would be ideal. The bouquet is ripe and really quite classy, wafting from the glass in a complex mix of dark berries, black cherries, woodsmoke, a touch of venison, Catalàn *garrigue*, espresso and discreet new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and plush at the core, with fine complexity and focus, moderate tannins and just a touch of backend heat poking out on the long finish. At fourteen percent alcohol this would be ideal (or even a little lower), but at 14.5 percent, I worry how it is going to age. For dinking now, the wine is very good, and it appears to have the structure to age nicely for at least another decade, but how will it handle its octane over the long haul? 2014-2025? **90** (for now).

### **2007 Joan Giné- Buil & Giné (Priorat)**

The 2007 Joan Giné is comprised of a blend of Garnaxta, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cariñena and spent twelve months aging in oak. At fourteen percent alcohol, this is pretty cool for Priorat and the wine offers up a maturing bouquet that is spicy and intriguing, wafting from the glass in a mix of dried cherries and raspberries, *garrigue*, spit-roasted meat, turmeric and plenty of oak spice tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still fairly chewy, with a good core of fruit, a nice base of stoniness, good focus and grip and a long, moderately tannic finish. I suspect that most or all of the barrels here were new, which has given the dried fruit aspect to the nose and flavors, but the wine is really very well-balanced and complex, and I like it quite well. Less new wood here would be a major move in the positive direction, as if the *terroir* was given center stage, this would be great juice. But, even as it is, there is little here to be disappointed about, as this is a classy bottle of Priorat that is starting to reach its apogee. 2014-2030+. **90+**.

### **2007 Cérvoles- La Poble de Cérvoles (Costers del Segre)**

The 2007 Cérvoles is made up of a blend of forty-four percent cabernet sauvignon, thirty-two percent tempranillo, sixteen percent garnaxta and eight percent merlot. The vineyards were planted here in the late 1980s, so they are coming into a very good age now. The wine was aged mostly in new French oak casks for fifteen months and tips the scales at 14.5 percent alcohol. This is a good wine that manages its alcohol pretty well on both the nose and palate, not showing any signs of overt heat, but it has the more gentle structure of a wine at this heady octane. The bouquet is a ripe blend of cassis, black raspberry, woodsmoke, Catalàn *garrigue*, hint of chicory, black pepper and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, plump and well-balanced, with moderate tannins and good length and grip on the buxom finish. A good, modern wine. 2014-2020+. **89**.

### **2007 Huguet de Can Feixes “Negre Tradició” (Penedès)**

I tasted this lovely wine two years ago during my visit to the winery, and the wine is still excellent, but seems to be showing its alcohol a bit more than was the case at that time (it is 13.5 percent alcohol). The wine is primarily made up of tempranillo, with supporting roles played by cabernet sauvignon, merlot and petit verdot, and the wine is raised in twenty percent new oak. The bouquet is deep, complex and classy, wafting from the glass in a blend of black cherries, dark chocolate, pomegranate, dried eucalyptus, smoke, just a whisper of oak and dark soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and beautifully focused, with a fine core of fruit, modest tannins, good acids and a long, complex and slightly warm finish that closes with a lovely note of bitter almond. The alcohol here is hardly obtrusive (and I am sure many folks

would have no issue with it at all!), but when the wine was younger and had a bit more puppy fat, it was not evident at all, and now just hovers a bit on the backend. I may be too picky, as this wine is truly admirable in its depth and complexity, but I would love to see it just a touch less ripe. 2014-2035. **92.**

**2006 Pasanau “Finca la Planeta” (Priorat)**

The 2006 Pasanau “Finca la Planeta” is the highest elevation vineyard owned by the winery, planted to a mix of eighty-eight percent cabernet sauvignon and twelve percent garnaxta. The wine is aged in new French oak, and the 2006, which came in at fourteen percent alcohol, delivers a maturing and really quite classy bouquet of baked raspberries, roasted venison, pepper, *garrigue*, stony soil tones, charred wood and spicy new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and fairly jammy on the attack, with a good core of fruit, fine soil signature, but a dry-edged backend from new oak tannins that have leached into solution in the wine and consigned it to the scrap heap of wines that never resolve their imbalanced, structural issues. There are good things going on in the wine itself, which is evolving nicely, but the oak tannins are hard, dry and immovable, and this wine will continue to just dry out as time goes by. It is a pity, as there is a really good wine under the sloppy new wood management, and this could have been special. I would opt for drinking it now through its tough tannins, as the imbalance is only going to become more prevalent with further bottle age, but it is really already pretty tough going in terms of tannins. 2014-2018+? **83** (with 92 point raw materials under the ill-advised, raw wood.)

**2004 Els Jelpins (Penedès)**

Els Jelpins is a small, natural wine project produced by Glòria Garriga and Oriol Illa, from their petite vineyard about an hour west of Barcelona. The wine is comprised of a blend of eighty year-old Sumoll vines (which are not allowed the DO of Penedès on the label, despite the grape being indigenous to the region- hence the Vi de Taula, or Table Wine, designation found on the back label) and Garnaxta. In fact, saying that there is information on the label here would not be quite accurate, as there is in fact no front label, just a “jlp” painted on the front of the bottle and the back label is about as small and hard to read as any I have ever seen- stealth wine marketing *par excellence*. Happily, once one surfs the internet for a half hour or so, there is some information to be found about the wine and Glòria and Oriol’s project, and while doing the research, the wine gets a chance to open up beautifully in the glass! The wine is made *biodynamically* and bottled without much SO<sub>2</sub>, but needs some decanting time once it is opened as it is a bit reductive when first poured. However, with air, there is an awful lot to like here on both the nose and palate of the 2004 (which comes in at fourteen percent alcohol), with the bouquet offering up a deep and complex mix of dark berries, chicory, roasted game, lovely soil tones, woodsmoke, a touch of tree bark and a topnote of lovely spice and savory tones, such as turmeric. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very nicely balanced, with a superb core, moderate, chewy tannins, lovely focus and balance and a very long, impressively complex and palate-staining finish. The wine is an impressive synthesis of the robust personality of the two grapes in the blend and very polished, hands off winemaking. The structure here seems sufficient to carry the wine for quite some time in the bottle, but this is a natural wine, and I have not really had a lot of positive experiences with long-term aging of wines made in such a manner, so who knows how long this wine will actually last in the bottle. But, in its totally idiosyncratic way, this is a really superb wine! To my knowledge, it is only available currently in Spain, but it would be well worth searching out for its unrepentant individuality and impressive quality! 2014-2025+? **93.**



### **1995 Col Lecció- Albet i Noya (Penedès)**

I stumbled across this bottle of 1995 Col Lecció from Albet i Noya on a very expansive wine list that was surprisingly short on Spanish wines (though with profound depth of producers and vintages in many other regions), and I thought it would be interesting to see how the wines from this bodega hold up with bottle age. Not surprisingly, the wine was really very good, but surprisingly, it was also still young and took fully thirty minutes in decanter to blossom from behind its structural elements and start to really show its qualities. From what I could gather from the back label, this is a blend of tempranillo and cabernet sauvignon, and the wine is still a tad on the young side as it celebrates its nineteenth birthday, offering up a deep and black fruit nose of dark berries, black cherries, tree bark, espresso, dried eucalyptus and a fine base of soil. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still a bit chewy, with a fine core and balance, lovely complexity and excellent length and grip on the focused finish. For the first half hour, this wine was pretty tarry and seemed a bit stillborn, but as it had a chance to blossom with air, it deepened, opened up and really offered lovely sweetness and depth of fruit at the core. An altogether impressive wine that is still improving and will be better with further bottle age. 2014-2030+. **89.**



*Looking down at the winery of Huguet de Can Feixes from their vineyards, with the Montserrat in the background.*

### ***Jumilla***

#### **2012 Carchelo- Bodegas Carchelo**

The 2012 Carchelo is a blend of forty percent Monastrell, thirty percent tempranillo, twenty percent syrah and ten percent cabernet sauvignon. The label states that this is 13.5 percent alcohol, but it smells and tastes as if it is higher than the claimed octane. The bouquet is a ripe and jammy blend of black raspberries, chocolate, coffee grounds and new oak. On the palate the wine is big, full-bodied, low acid and prune, with a good core, plenty of backend alcohol and a raisiny, chewy and dull finish. This is overripe, and has a plastic cork, to add to its problems. 2014-2017+? **83.**

### ***Utiel-Requena and Manchuela***

#### **2012 Bobal Old Vines “11 Pinos”- Vega Tolosa (Manchuela)**

The 2012 version of 11 Pinos from Vega Tolosa purports to be fourteen percent alcohol, but it smells decidedly riper and sweeter than only fourteen percent to my unseasoned nose. This wine actually smells a bit like vintage Port and offers up a sweet aromatic blend of blackberry syrup, chocolate, coffee grounds and dark soil tones. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, flat and already oxidative, with zero acidity, plenty of mid-palate plumpness, a fair bit of gritty tannins and a long, dry-edged and unpleasant finish. Is this really the wine? ????

#### **2011 Bobal- Temperamento**

I have a warm spot in my heart for wines made from the Bobal grape, as I have had some absolutely lovely examples and find that the grape ages quite gracefully. The 2011 Bobal from Temperamento is raised in one hundred percent new French oak, but only for six to eight months duration, after which it is raked into stainless steel tanks to finish its *elevage* prior to bottling. The wine is quite ripe, but as the vineyards sit at 3,000 feet above sea level and are sixty years or age, it is not overripe, wafting from the glass in a complex mix of black cherries, dark chocolate, wild fennel, dark soil tones, lavender and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite plush on the attack, with a fine core, moderate tannins and a long, low acid, but nicely complex finish. This is not going to be one of those longer-lived examples of Bobal, but there is a lot here to like for drinking over the next eight to ten years. 2014-2022+. **89.**

### ***Yecla***

#### **2013 Monastrell “Viñas Viejas”- Bodegas Castaño**

The 2013 Monastrell “Viñas Viejas” from Bodegas Castaño is sealed under a screwcap for the American market, and the sample I had was already quite reduced and needed some extended aeration to show any signs of life. With some air, the wine does blossom a bit, offering up scents of pomegranate, chicory, dark soil and herbs, as well as permanently reductive notes of rubber tire and asparagus that do not budge after an hour in decanter. On the palate the wine is also compromised by its closure, with its full-bodied format quite pinched in the mid-palate, short and “scalped”, with sulfur-based, off flavors and a clipped, modestly tannic and flawed finish. I often wonder about importers who choose this closure for their wines- do they never drink or taste them after they have made their decisions in the cellar, as this wine is so blatantly reduced as to be undrinkable, and yet someone sent me a sample! Weird business. 2014-2014. **70.**

## *Alicante*

### **2012 Ramblís del Arco- Bodegas Bernabé Navarro**

The Ramblís del Arco from Rafa Bernabé is made entirely from the rare indigenous grape of Fourcayat grape, with the vines ranging from forty to more than eighty years or age. The wine is aged in a mixture of three and four wine French barrels and new Acacia wood barrels for six months. The parcels of Fourcayat vines that make up this bottling are at a fairly high elevation of approximately seven hundred and fifty meters above sea level, which helps cool down the vineyards a bit at night in this torrid region, and the wine retains lovely brightness and lightness of step as a result. The bouquet on the 2012 is a mixture of red and black cherries, tree bark, cola, lovely soil tones, woodsmoke and chicory. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and a bit tarry on the backend, with a fine core, chewy tannins and excellent length and grip on the youthful and complex finish. This is fine juice, but I would be tempted to give it at least two or three years in the cellar to soften up a bit and blossom. It is fascinating wine (and the first Fourcayat I have ever tasted). 2017-2035. **90.**

### **2012 Monastrell “Ramblís”- Bodegas Bernabé Navarro**

Señor Bernabé’s old vine bottling of Monastrell hails from sixty to seventy year-old vines planted on a fine plot of limestone, and the wine never sees any new wood, being raised for six months in one to four year-old barrels. The 2012 comes in at fourteen percent alcohol, which is pretty routine in the hot region of Alicante, but the wine shows nice precision and lift on the palate, rather than the typically jammy structural overtones of much Alicante wine. The bouquet is a deep and black fruity blend of dark berries, a bit of raisin, charred wood, coffee grounds, lovely soil undertow, tar and brambly herb tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely soil-driven, with a fine core, firm, chewy tannins, very good balance and a long, primary and tarry finish that shows absolutely no signs of heat on the backend. This needs some bottle age, but it is going to be a very good wine, as it nicely brings together the robust style of Alicante with impressive soil signature and focus. Good juice. 2019-2035+. **88+.**

### **2012 Los Cipresses de Usaldón- Bodegas Bernabé Navarro**

The Los Cipresses de Usaldón from Bodegas Bernabé Navarro is one of the lowest alcohol wines I have ever crossed paths with from Alicante, coming in at 12.5 percent alcohol and being crafted from the Garnacha Peluda grape variety. The grape is planted on limestone soils in the vineyard of Finca Usaldón, with the vines averaging fifty years of age. The 2012 was partially carbonically-macerated and aged in four year-old, five hundred liter barrels for six months prior to bottling. The 2012 is excellent, jumping from the glass in a bright and complex nose of pomegranate, bitter cherry, a potpourri of exotic herb tones, a lovely base of soil and a touch of cinnamon stick in the upper register. On the palate the wine is superbly light on its feet, with its medium-full format delivering a lovely core, excellent intensity of flavor, some firm tannins and a long, tangy and transparent finish that closes with a Barolo-like note of road tar. This could use a year or two in the cellar to soften up a bit on the backend and its apogee is probably six to eight years from now, but it is eminently drinkable today with grilled meats and really is an impressively complex and soil-driven wine.. I have never tasted anything like it from Alicante! 2016-2030+. **92+.**

## *Rioja Blanco*

### **2013 Rioja Blanco “Monopole”- Cuné**

The Rioja Blanco “Monopole” bottling from Cuné is produced from one hundred percent Viura, and the 2013 offers up a fine bouquet of pineapple, a touch of coconut, white soil tones,

beeswax, spring flowers and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and nicely balanced, with a fine core, lovely complexity and a long, focused finish. Lovely juice that is made for early drinking, but with the balance to also age gracefully for many years. Superb value! 2014-2025+. **90.**

**2009 Rioja Blanco- Señorío de P. Peciña**

I love the wines from the Peciña bodega, and their 2009 Rioja Blanco is excellent. The deep and complex nose wafts from the glass in a complex and classy blend of apple, white peach, a touch of fresh nutmeg, gentle leesy tones and a topnote of citrus peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with bright, vibrant acidity, excellent focus and grip and a long, zesty and refined finish. Fine juice. 2014-2025+. **90+.**

**2003 Viña Gravonia Rioja Blanco- López de Heredia**

The Viña Gravonia Rioja Blanco from López de Heredia has been one of the best white wine values to be found in the market for several years now, but I note that the wine has been discovered and its price is creeping up a bit in recent times. The bottling is made up of one hundred percent Viura. The 2003 Viña Gravonia is another fine wine, offering up a deep and complex nose of pear, lemon and orange peel, coconut, white soils, and a nice touch of beeswax in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep. Full-bodied, complex and beautifully balanced, with a fine core, fine secondary layers of complexity, bright acids and excellent length and grip on the focused and very classy finish. High class juice for its price tag. 2014-2025. **90.**

**1998 Viña Tondonia Rioja Reserva Blanco- López de Heredia**

In contrast to the Viña Gravonia, the Viña Tondonia Blanco is made up of only ninety percent Viura, with ten percent of the *cépages* Malvasia. The 1998 Reserva is a truly beautiful wine that is still fairly young at age sixteen, and this wine will continue to evolve beautifully for a couple more decades. The bouquet is excellent, wafting from the glass in a complex blend of white peach, coconut, a touch of fresh almond, ocean breeze, beeswax, orange peel and a beautifully complex base of white soil tones. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and beautifully complex, with a good core, crisp acids, lovely focus and breed and a very long, vibrant and perfectly balanced finish. A classic vintage of this iconic wine. 2014-2035. **93.**

***Rioja Tinto***

*The region of Rioja remains the king of red wines in Spain, despite the fact that these days, there are less top producers making traditional wines than there were in the past, and one really has to focus on only a handful of producers if one is interested in old school Rioja- the type of wines that have aged so brilliantly down through the years and which are reported on in so much depth in the notes that follow. I suppose it is just human nature to want to change things and follow modern trends, which here means things like heavier extractions and lots of French new wood, but it is sad that so few producers are wed to the great historical legacy of Rioja and understand that what made their region vital and profitable in the past was a certain style of wine that can be replicated nowhere else on earth. For the sad truth is that a lot of the modern Rioja wines- very few of which crossed my desk in preparation for this article- taste as if they could have been made anywhere and from any blend of grape varieties, as they really do show almost zero Rioja character in their aromatic and flavor profiles. A lot of these are well enough made wines to have positive attributes, but served blind, very few people would immediately think that the wine in question was made in Rioja. Happily, there has been one great new bodega to join the traditional Rioja firmament in the last twenty years, Señorío de Pedro P. Peciña, which was found only in 1992. Señor Peciña worked at La Rioja Alta for eighteen years as their*

*head of viticulture, prior to starting his own bodega in the same sub-region of Rioja, on the northern side of the Ebro River. The estate now owns fifty hectares of vines, at higher altitudes and most often also situated with a northerly exposition, so that the vines get some respite from the afternoon sun. The wines are utterly traditional in style- in fact, perhaps even a touch more traditional than the wines of La Rioja Alta themselves (where just a touch of French wood has wandered into the elevage here- though they remain still very, very fine and still quite old school in sensibilities, even with their dollop of French wood)- with long elevage in old, American oak casks, frequent rackings (every six months) and bottle aging prior to release. They are truly beautiful wines, which I have reported upon in past features on Rioja, and the current lineup of releases from the bodega are as fine as any I have ever tasted from Señor Peciña.*

*While the bulk of this report covers older vintages of Rioja that I have been lucky enough to drink over the last year or two, I did manage to taste the full lineup of new releases from two of the old school producers still to be found in the region, La Rioja Alta and Cuné. Both of these estates are making truly excellent wines today, but both have dipped their toes in the water of modernity and started to use a bit of French oak in their aging regimens- though this still seems to be very judiciously balanced by plenty of older American barrels as well. Both estates continue to make wines that show the velvety textural elements of great old school Rioja, with plenty to commend the wines from both bodegas, but both also have just a touch of cedary elements in evidence in the younger wines from their percentage of French barrels. While I imagine that this signature will dissipate with extended bottle age, it is probably always going to be part of the personalities of these very well-made wines, and though I do not find the French wood done in an off-putting manner at either house, I am also completely unsure if it adds anything positive to the signatures of the wines in question. It is not a criticism of either bodegas' current releases, as they are extremely well-made, but stylistically, I still prefer the wines from back in the day, when they were raised exclusively in older American oak barrels. And, as the notes below will attest, I do have some recent experience with older vintages from both estates! In fact, as readers may recall that I am currently at work on a large, historical feature on the wines of Cuné for a future issue, I have only included a small percentage of my recent notes on older wines from this bodega in this report- enough to give them their proper due in the firmament of classic Rioja, where they belong right up at the top with a handful of other legendary estates- but, I have retained a large chunk of older notes on Cuné wines for the upcoming historical article on the bodega and most of the notes on Cuné wines that are included here are for their more recent releases.*

### **2012 Rioja Joven- Señorío de P. Pedro Peciña**

The 2012 Rioja Joven- Señorío de P. Pedro Peciña is very typical of this style of Rioja-made to be drunk young, black fruity and seeing no oak aging. The wine is produced from the youngest vines on the estate, ranging from fifteen to twenty years of age. The bouquet offers up a bright and youthful mélange of cassis, a touch of black pepper, Rioja spice tones and *garrigue*. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, nascently complex and tangy, with just a touch of tannin and good, sneaky length and grip on the primary finish. Good everyday juice. 2014-2025.  
**88.**

### **2010 Rioja Crianza- Cuné**

The 2010 Rioja Crianza from Cuné is a very nice wine and an excellent value. The bouquet offers up a bright and black fruity blend of cassis, black cherries, a touch of pepper,

Rioja spice tones, cigar smoke and cedar. On the palate the wine is medium-full, suave and velvety, with just a whisper of tannin, nice balance and surprisingly good length on the finish. This is made in an easy-drinking style for early consumption, but is very well done in this style. 2014-2020. **87.**



### **2009 Rioja Reserva- Marqués de Cáceres**

The 2009 Rioja Reserva from Marqués de Cáceres is pretty ripe at 13.5 percent alcohol, but nicely balanced nonetheless and shows lovely, nascent complexity on both the nose and palate. The bouquet delivers a fine mélange of cherries, red plums, Rioja spice tones, touch of nutskin and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely velvety on the attack with a good core, fine complexity, but again, like so many Rioja estates who use new French barrels these days, the oak tannins here have been leached in a bit too aggressively and the wine is a bit dry-edged on the finish as a result. This is not bad, but it could have been excellent with older American oak in the cellar, instead of new French. 2014-2020+? **86+.**

### **2009 Rioja “Viña Real” Crianza- Cuné**

The 2009 Rioja “Viña Real” Crianza from Cuné is really a lovely entry level Rioja and one of the top bargains out there for wines from this region. The deep and complex nose offers up a typically black fruity Viña Real blend of dark berries, espresso, woodsmoke, a bit of meatiness, soil tones, turmeric and spicy wood. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and spicy, with a perfectly respectable core of fruit, just a touch of tannin, tangy acids and really

good length and grip on the complex finish. The wood tones here are at least partially French, with which I am not in love, but there is no denying that this wine packs an awful lot of intensity and complexity for its price. In the overheated US wine market, this can be found for around \$12 a bottle and in Spain, under \$5, and this is one hell of a wine for that price! 2014-2025+. **89.**

#### **2009 Rioja Reserva- Cuné**

The 2009 Rioja Reserva from Cuné is made in a blend of French and American oak barrels, and shows just a bit of cedary French wood on the nose and palate, making it a bit of a hybrid in aromatic profile, but still a pretty old school Rioja on the silky palate. The bouquet is really quite nice, offering up scents of dark berries, Rioja spice tones, a nice touch of soil, a bit of cigar ash, a whiff of coconut and cedar. On the palate the wine is medium-full, bright and complex, with a good core, a bit of ripe tannin on the backend, good acids and a long, well-balanced finish. This is already quite accessible, but should be even better with a few more years in the cellar. I am probably too old-fashioned to ever get accustomed to French oak influence in my Rioja, but here, it is very reined-in and the wine is quite successful, albeit not as classic as my parochial tastes would like to see it! 2014-2025+. **88+.**

#### **2009 Rioja “Viña Real Oro” Reserva- Cuné**

The 2009 Rioja “Viña Real Oro” Reserva from Cuné is a lovely wine, and though it is raised in both American and French barrels, it seems to have retained more American oak character than many of the other recent releases from Cuné. Needless to say, this is all to the good in my book. The superb nose is young, unevolved and really promising, as it wafts from the glass in a mélange of black plums, black cherries, a touch of fresh nutmeg, really fine soil tones, Rioja spice tones, espresso, a touch of toasted coconut, cigar smoke and a dollop of cedar. On the palate the wine is medium-full, complex and beautifully balanced, with a lovely core, impressive intensity of flavor without undue weight, a moderate dose of tannin and a long, bright and youthful finish. It seems that a bit of the tannins here are French wood-derived, but they will be absorbed seamlessly with a touch of bottle age, and this will be a really superb wine with a couple of years’ worth of bottle age. 2016-2040. **92.**

#### **2009 Ibéricos- Soto de Torres (Rioja)**

The 2009 Ibéricos from Soto de Torres is a good, old-school style of Rioja in terms of weight and extract, with plenty of red fruit and spice from its Tempranillo, but also with a few signs of spicy French oak on the nose. The youthful and relatively classic nose offers up scents of cherries, baked strawberries, woodsmoke, nutty tones, spicy Rioja soil and a touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is medium-full, complex and silky on the attack, with a good core of fruit, fine focus and a bit of firm tannin perking the long finish. The wood on the backend is not perfectly integrated here yet, but a few more years of bottle age should take care of this. I would love to see this same wine raised entirely in older, American oak barrels, as it would take this wine up a notch or two in class and old-school charm. But, this is a very well-made wine that should age well. 2014-2030. **88+.**

#### **2007 Rioja Reserva- Contino**

Contino is the beautifully-situated, amphitheater of a vineyard that is owned by Cuné and was first produced in the 1973 vintage. Because of its amphitheater shape, it can be quite a heat trap and the 2007 comes in at a full fourteen percent alcohol, which is pretty ripe, but the wine harnesses its ripeness quite well and shows good precision to its aromatic and flavor profile, and only a trace of fleeting backend heat on the finish. The fine nose wafts from the glass in a blend of cassis, dark berries, a bit of spiced meats, cigar smoke, coffee grounds, soil and cedar. On the



palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, nascently complex and very well-balanced, with a fine core of fruit, ripe tannins and a long, youthful and potentially velvety finish. This needs a few years in the cellar to really come into its own (not that the sample was bad with a steak on the grill!), and it is very well-made and will be lovely in the fullness of time. I would still have loved to have seen it lower in octane, as it would be better focused and pure, but this is a fine bottle that will age well. 2018-2040+. **91+**.

#### **2007 Rioja “Imperial” Reserva- Cuné**

The 2007 Imperial Reserva from Cuné is fairly ripe, coming in at 13.5 percent alcohol, and this probably reflects the bodega’s decision to harvest their fruit in La Rioja Alta late in the fall, after the rains had passed through in this vintage. Like several of the recent wines from Cuné, there is a bit of French oak influence apparent on both the nose and palate, with some cedar in the mix, which I find distracting, but others may like quite well. The bouquet is certainly deep and complex, offering up scents of black cherries, dark plums, a bit of coconut, woodsmoke, spicy soil tones and cedar. On the palate the wine is suave, full-bodied and nascently complex, with a good core, fine focus, a bit of chewy tannin and a long, slightly hot, and quite cedary finish. Like the above wine, this will probably age along the lines of the 1982, and while it is very good, I would love to see it a tad less ripe and without the French wood in the mix. 2017-2035+. **90+**.

#### **2007 Rioja “Imperial” Gran Reserva- Cuné**

It has been a while since I have tasted current releases of both the Reserva and Gran Reserva Imperial bottlings from the same vintage, but this clearly shows how highly the team at Cuné regards the vintage of 2007. The Imperial Gran Reserva ’07 is pretty ripe by Cuné standards, coming in at the typical vintage octane level of 13.5 percent, but the bouquet shows absolutely no signs of heat or overripeness in its fine mélange of black cherries, dark plums, toasted coconut, lovely soil tones and Rioja spices in the upper register. With extended aeration, a bit of cedar also appears in the aromatics, showing a bit of French wood usage in the cellars as well. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and velvety on the attack, with a lovely core, superb elegance and balance, moderate, well-integrated tannins and outstanding length and grip on the focused and very complex finish. A classic Imperial Gran Reserva in the making. 2014-2040+. **93+**.

#### **2007 Rioja “Viña Alberdi” Reserva- La Rioja Alta**

The 2007 Rioja “Viña Alberdi” Reserva from La Rioja Alta is pretty ripe at 13.5 percent alcohol, but still nicely balanced and drinking quite well at age seven. The bouquet is a fine blend of red plums, cherries, Rioja spices, a nice touch of coconutty American oak, a dollop of soil and a bit of chocolate in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely complex, with a fine core of velvety fruit, moderate, fairly silky tannins, good depth and balance and a long, still slightly youthful finish. This is a good drink today, but a few more years in the cellar should allow secondary layers of complexity to emerge, and the wine has the structure to carry on nicely for fifteen or twenty years. It reminds me a bit of the 1982s when they were first released, as there is just a touch of jamminess to the wine today from its ripeness, but as those wines have aged into more refined examples than I initially suspected, so too, this wine could really snap into even better focus with some extended bottle age. It is a very well-made wine, but I can only imagine its precision at 12.5 or 13 percent! 2014-2030+. **88+**.

#### **2007 Rioja Crianza- Señorío de P. Pedro Peciña**

To give some idea of how the estate of Señorío de P. Pedro Peciña is holding back their wines longer than many of the other traditionalists in the region these days, their current release

of their Crianza is from the 2007 vintage, which is the same vintage being featured by several bodegas for their Reserva new releases. This wine is produced from vines that are thirty years of age, and it is aged two years in older American barrels and then two years in bottle prior to release. The 2007 Crianza is excellent wine and a superb value, wafting from the glass in a lovely and still quite youthful blend of cherries, red plums, chocolate, a nice framing of American wood (with attendant notes of toasted coconut), a fine base of soil and a bit of fresh nutmeg in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and complex, with a touch of tannin, fine focus and grip and a long, tangy and complex finish. Lovely juice. 2014-2035. **90.**

#### **2007 Rioja Reserva- Valenciso**

This was my first taste of a Rioja from Valenciso, which has vineyards in La Rioja Alta. The wine is really ripe for Rioja, tipping the scales at 14.5 percent alcohol and the wine is raised entirely in French oak barrels. The wine is actually fairly well-balanced for its octane, with the alcohol not too obtrusive on the backend and the wine still showing some of traditional Rioja's velvety textural elements. The bouquet is a blend of red and black cherries, Rioja spices, fresh herb tones, a nice base of soil and plenty of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and quite attractive on the attack, with a good core, nice complexity, but some dry wood tannins hardening the finish from the high octane on the long backend. The wood is not overdone here, but at 14.5 percent, the oak tannins leech into solution at a brisker rate, and the wine has ended up with some bitterness from the new wood tannins as a result. Clearly, the raw materials here are pretty good, but the wine needed to be picked earlier to keep the alcohol down and the wood regimen here needs rethinking. The wine is okay, but I bet these folks could make great Rioja with some re-thinking of their cellar philosophy. 2014-2020+? **87.**

#### **2006 Rioja "Viña Real" Gran Reserva- Cuné**

The 2006 Rioja "Viña Real" Gran Reserva from Cuné is a really superb bottle in the making, offering up a deep and complex bouquet of cassis, dark berries, espresso, a bit of roasted game, dark soil tones, incipient notes of cigar smoke and a nice blend of coconutty American wood and cedary French wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and very elegant, with superb soil signature, a lovely core of fruit, excellent focus and balance and a very long, moderately tannic and tangy finish. This wine came in at 13.5 percent alcohol, but shows no signs of either heat on the palate or overripeness on the nose, but is wonderfully pure and impressive defined by its soil drive on the backend. A superb Viña Real in the making, I would opt for giving this wine another four to five years in the cellar to really start to develop its secondary layers of complexity. It is very approachable and tasty today, but it is still clearly climbing in quality! 2018-2040+. **94.**

#### **2005 Rioja Gran Reserva- Marqués de Cáceres**

The 2005 Rioja Gran Reserva from Marqués de Cáceres is a very nice wine that is pretty ripe at 13.5 percent alcohol, and does show just a touch of heat on the backend, but there is a lot here to like despite this slight imbalance. The bouquet is deep, complex and classy, wafting from the glass in a blend of red and black cherries, woodsmoke, Rioja spices, a nice base of soil, a touch of gamebird, mustard seed and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and rock solid at the core, with some firm tannins (some of which are oak-derived), fine focus and a long, slightly warm, complex and chewy finish. The raw materials here are truly excellent, but the wine has to struggle a bit to carry its French wood, and at 13.5 percent, it will probably

always be just a touch dry-edged. But, this wine has merits, despite some imperfections. 2014-2025+. **88.**

#### **2005 Rioja “Viña Arana” Reserva- La Rioja Alta**

2005 looks at this early date to be a classic vintage in the making in Rioja and the '05 Viña Arana Reserva is really a superb wine. At thirteen percent alcohol, this wine is quite classic in its youthful profile, offering up a pure and primary bouquet of cherries, raspberries, cocoa, Rioja spices, a fine base of soil tones, a bit of mustard seed and cedar. On the palate the wine is fullish, pure and intensely flavored, with a fine core, lovely focus and balance, a still fairly youthful profile, very suave, sophisticated tannins and a long, tangy and very promising finish. This is really a classically balanced example of Rioja that is going to be dynamite with a few years in the cellar, so that the secondary layers of complexity can start to emerge. It is very tasty today, but the complexity is going to need time to more fully emerge. 2019-2040. **92.**

#### **2005 Rioja Reserva- Señorío de P. Pedro Peciña**

The 2005 Rioja Reserva from Señorío de P. Pedro Peciña is outstanding, offering up a deep and vibrant bouquet of cherries, raspberries, cloves, fresh nutmeg, cinnamon, a beautifully complex base of soil and coconutty American oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, complex and shows off beautiful mid-palate depth, with modest tannins, bright acids, lovely soil signature and a very long, refined and classic finish. The bodega uses older vines for this bottling as well and also selects grapes from their higher elevation vineyards for their Reserva wines, which no doubt contribute to the absolutely beautiful aromatic purity and complexity in the wines. This is superb wine that is still climbing in quality at nine years of age and will evolve beautifully with time in the cellar. 2014-2040+. **92+.**

#### **2004 Rioja “Viña Ardanza” Reserva- La Rioja Alta**

I have a weak spot for Viña Ardanza, as this was the very first serious Rioja I ever had the pleasure to taste at the start of my career (though I do have to say I liked the old, white label with the gold medals on the side so much better than the current tan label, even if the old one was a bit “campy”), so I was very happy to see that the 2004 Reserva was a very successful wine. This is plenty ripe at 13.5 percent alcohol, but classy and balanced at the same time, as it offers up a fine bouquet of cherries, cloves, red plums, a touch of cardamom, lovely soil tones, nutskins, cocoa and a combination of American and French oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and velvety, with a fine core, lovely focus and balance, fine-grained tannins and a long, refined and nascently complex finish. This is really a lovely wine in the making, and while it is extremely tasty today in its youthful innocence, I would tuck it away in the cellar for three or four years and let its secondary layers of complexity emerge. Lovely juice. 2017-2040+. **92+.**

#### **2001 Rioja Gran Reserva“904”- La Rioja Alta**

The 2001 Rioja Gran Reserva“904” from La Rioja Alta is a very classic wine in terms of its octane, tipping the scales at an old school and very cool 12.5 percent. The wine is outstanding, wafting from the glass in a complex and classy mélange of red and black cherries, a touch of raspberry, cloves, spicy Rioja soil tones, mustard seed, incipient nutskin, a touch of toasted coconut from American oak, as well as bit of cedar from its French wood section of the orchestra. On the palate the wine is just beautiful, offering up stunning intensity of flavor without undue weight in its medium-full, but rock solid format. The wine has a lovely core of fruit, superb soil signature, a touch of tannin, tangy acids and great focus and balance on the very long and complex finish. This is a beautiful wine that will age for decades and decades. It is not a

blockbuster by any stretch of the imagination, but a wine that will develop great perfume and nuances of complexity as the years unfold. Great juice. 2014-2050. **94+**.

**2001 Rioja Gran Reserva- Señorío de P. Pedro Peciña**

The 2001 Gran Reserva from Pedro Peciña is a stunning wine, made from the oldest vines that the bodega owns, with most in excess of sixty years of age. Like all of the Peciña wines, the 2001 Gran Reserva is comprised of a blend of ninety-five percent Tempranillo, with three percent Graciano and two percent Garnacha, and the wine is aged four years in old American casks and then an additional three years in bottle prior to release. Pretty old school! The stunning nose soars from the glass in a blaze of plums, cherries, coconut, cinnamon, a nice touch of meatiness, a beautifully complex base of spicy Rioja soil tones and gently smoky overtone. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and velvety, with a lovely core of fruit, suave, modest tannins and superb focus and grip on the complex, vibrant and very refined finish. First class, old school Rioja. 2014-2040+. **94**.

**2001 Rioja Seleccionada Reserva- Señorío de P. Pedro Peciña**

The Seleccionada Reserva bottling from Señorío de P. Pedro Peciña is also made from old vines, and this wine is produced from a specific parcel that sits at the highest elevation of all of their vines, with a due north exposition, which allows the wine to maintain uncanny aromatic and flavor precision and a more black fruity personality than any other wine in their stable. The 2001 Seleccionada Reserva is superb, offering up a complex and very refined bouquet of black cherries, cassis, fresh herb tones, cloves, fresh nutmeg and toasted coconut elements from its old American oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and more primary in personality than the 2001 Gran Reserva, with a superb core of fruit, moderate, well-integrated tannins and outstanding length and grip on the complex and focused finish. Give this beauty a few more years in the cellar to really start to blossom. 2017-2050. **94+**.

**1995 Rioja “Viña Bosconia” Gran Reserva- López de Heredia**

The 1995 Viña Bosconia Gran Reserva is a beautiful bottle of Rioja that is beginning to drink with great style and generosity, but still has decades ahead of it. The deep, pure and classic nose wafts from the glass in a mix of cherries, strawberries, Rioja spice tones redolent of cloves and cinnamon stick, a beautiful base of soil, woodsmoke, fresh herbs and a gentle base of coconutty American oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and velvety, with excellent focus and complexity, a deep core of fruit, still a touch of tannin and excellent length and grip on the tangy and soil-driven finish. Fine, fine juice. 2014-2045+. **94**.

**1995 Rioja “Viña Ardanza” Reserva- La Rioja Alta**

The 1995 Viña Ardanza Reserva shows a fair bit of ripeness on both the nose and palate, which I suspect will ultimately make it a fairly short-lived vintage for this fine bottling. The bouquet offers up a blend of cherries, plums, nice spice tones, orange peel, coconutty American oak, a fine base of soil and a troubling hint of tea leaves in the upper register that suggests a short shelf life. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely plump at the core, with moderate tannins, still a fair bit of tannin and good length and grip on the complex finish. This is still a very good bottle, but I have had recent vintages that I think will stay the course in the cellar better than the 1995 Ardanza. 2012-2030+. **89+**.

**1994 Rioja “904” Gran Reserva- La Rioja Alta**

La Rioja Alta has played around a bit with their oak regimen in the last few decades, and it seems pretty clear that in the mid-1990s, they were still relying on American oak casks, but

starting to rotate some newer ones into the cellars. The wine is marked a bit by its new US oak (even nearly twenty years out from the vintage!), but offers up lovely and quite classic elements underneath in its aromatic mélange of red plums, cherries, nutmeg, lovely soil tones, coconut and some new oak spice. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and very classy on the attack, with a superb core, good focus and a very long, still fairly tannic finish. All older barrels would have been preferable for this wine, but it has the stuffing to eventually absorb all of its wood tannins and is really a classic vintage of 904 underneath the bit of new wood. It still could use a couple of years, and is probably still a decade away from its peak textural blossoming. 2016-2040+. **93+**.

#### **1994 Rioja Reserva- Marqués de Murrieta**

The 1994 Rioja Reserva from Marqués de Murrieta is a very nice wine, but it is a wine that seems just a bit rigid from its incorporation of some new French barrels into its cellaring regimen. The bouquet is a deep blend of cherries, red plums, Rioja spices, lovely soil tones and plenty of spicy, new French wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and a touch angular today, with a good core of fruit, still a fair bit of tannin and a long, primary and chewy finish that closes with good grip. This is not bad and will be even better with a bit more bottle age, but the French oak influence here just seems a bit alien to my palate. 2014-2035. **88+**.

#### **1994 Rioja “Monte Real” Reserva- Bodegas Riojanas**

The 1994 Monte Real Reserva is the first vintage I can recall seeing a bit of French oak in the aromatic and flavor profile of this fine wine, and while it is still very well done and quite classic in all other elements, it is not cut precisely from the same cloth of vintages from 1991 back of this great bottling. That said, there is still an awful lot to like here, as the wine jumps from the glass in a mélange of cherries, Christmas pudding, cardamom, a great base of soil tones, orange peel and a mix of French and American oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and quite complex, with a lovely core of fruit, fine soil signature, moderate tannins and a nice sense of reserve on the well-balanced and classy finish. This is fine juice in the making, but give me the one hundred percent old school 1991 Monte Real Reserva over this vintage, which is just dipping its toe in the water of unnecessary change. 2014-2050. **93**.

#### **1994 Rioja Reserva- Marqués de Riscal**

The 1994 Rioja Reserva from Marqués de Riscal is a good solid wine, but like the '94 Monte Real Reserva, there are some French *barriques* creeping into the personality of this wine. The bouquet is quite marked by its cedary component, but underneath offers up scents of black cherries, dark berries, nutskins, lovely spice tones and dark soil. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite fine on the attack, with a good core of fruit, but some dry-edged, oak-derived tannins from those new French barrels, that detract from the overall balance of the wine. The finish is still quite long, but there is just a touch of backend stewiness here as well that seems to indicate that the new barrels in the cellar allowed just a touch too much micro-oxygenation prior to bottling. The wine is not bad, but Riscal can make better wines than this- and did so, for many, many decades. 2016-2030+? **87+**.

#### **1991 Rioja “Monte Real” Reserva- Bodegas Riojanas**

The 1991 vintage in Rioja is absolutely lovely, and the Monte Real Reserva is a beautiful example of this fine year. The stunning nose jumps from the glass in a sappy blend of red and black cherries, cloves, cinnamon, spicy soil tones, orange zest, a nice touch of meatiness, savory herb tones and a deft framing of coconutty American oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and tangy, with a fine core, excellent complexity, moderate tannins and great acids

adding precision and brightness on the long and very, very classy finish. A great, great wine and one of the superb bargains still out there in the world of Rioja. 2014-2050+. **94+**.

### **1987 Rioja “Viña Albina” Gran Reserva- Bodegas Riojanas**

The 1987 Rioja “Viña Albina” Gran Reserva from Bodegas Riojanas is a very lovely example of the vintage and at age fifteen is fully mature and drinking at its peak. The lovely and perfumed bouquet delivers scents of plums, cherries, nutmeg, lovely soil tones, cocoa powder, celery seed and a nice base of coconutty oak. On the palate the wine is fullish, pure and wide open for business, with a plump core, melting tannins and a long, complex and velvety finish. Just a lovely bottle for drinking over the next ten to fifteen years (or more). 2012-2025+. **90**.

### **1987 Rioja “Monte Real” Gran Reserva- Bodegas Riojanas**

The 1987 Rioja “Monte Real” Gran Reserva is a beautiful wine that is now wide open and drinking with great style, but as the notes on older vintages of this iconic Rioja bottling will attest, it is still at the start of its journey. The utterly classic nose wafts from the glass in a mix of cherries, blood orange, gamebirds, spicy soil tones, incipient autumnal shadings, cloves and coconutty American oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, complex and tangy, with a fine core of fruit, modest tannins, outstanding focus and grip and a very long, velvety and vibrant finish. Beautiful juice. 2014-2040+. **92+**.

### **1982 Rioja “Imperial” Gran Reserva- Cuné**

Cuné made some of my absolute favorite wines in the vintage of 1982, as the bodegas seemingly avoided any of the potential pitfalls of overripeness in this torrid summer and produced truly superb and classic wines in '82. The 1982 Imperial Gran Reserva is an excellent wine, wafting from the glass in a complex and still fairly youthful blend of cherries, raspberries, Rioja spice tones, a nice touch of nutskin, a dollop of menthol and a fine framing of coconutty American oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and elegant, with a fine core of fruit, tangy acids and fine length and grip on the well-balanced and complex finish. High class juice. 2014-2040+. **93**.

### **1982 Rioja “Monte Real”- Bodegas Riojanas**

The 1982 Monte Real is another very fresh example from this very warm vintage. The wine delivers a superb aromatic constellation of cherries, raspberries, cloves, a touch of spiced meats, lovely, spicy Rioja soil tones and a touch of fresh thyme in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, pure and tangy, with a fine core, excellent focus and grip and a very long, wide open and beautifully balanced finish. This wine has now reached its apogee of peak maturity, but it should cruise along at this peak for a couple of decades and offer up excellent drinking over this time period. 2014-2035+. **93+**.

### **1981 Prado Enea Rioja Reserva- Muga**

Prado Enea is my favorite bottling produced by Muga, though I often find that it is heavily influenced by its Garnacha component and its personality is really one of the most Châteauneuf du Pape-like wines produced in Rioja. The 1981 Prado Enea is a marvelous example of the magical 1981 Rioja vintage, and at age thirty-two, it is just starting to reach its apogee of peak maturity. The very complex bouquet offers up a superb blend of cherries, fruitcake, orange zest, gentle notes of nutskin, Rioja spice tones, a bit of meatiness and incipient notes of chipotle pepper in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and absolutely singing today, with a fine core of fruit, still a touch of remaining tannins,

tangy acids and outstanding length and grip on the focused and very classic finish. Great juice. 2012-2040. **94.**

**1981 Rioja “Viña Bosconia” Gran Reserva- López de Heredia**

The 1981 Viña Bosconia Gran Reserva is a lovely bottle of wine, wafting from the glass in a complex and vibrant constellation of cherries, raspberries, cloves, coffee, spicy Rioja soil tones, orange peel, wild fennel and a topnote of fresh herbs. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish, suave and bouncy, with a fine core, a still fairly tightly-knit personality, moderate tannins and very good length and grip on the long and tangy finish. This particular bottle still seems a bit youthfully bound up in its structure and in need of more time. 2013-2040. **92+?**

**1978 Rioja “Viña Albina” Reserva- Bodegas Riojanas**

The 1978 Viña Albina is a beautiful wine that perfectly captures the elegance and ethereal spice tones that this cuvée routinely delivers at its apogee. The terrific bouquet delivers a potpourri of raspberries, a touch of tomato, cinnamon, cloves, fresh-baked pastries, gentle overtones of nutskin, complex soil nuances and a bit of fresh herb tones in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and silky, with a plus core of fruit, beautiful complexity and breed and a very long, tangy and wide open finish. As this wine opens up in decanter, it really blossoms beautifully, fanning out and becoming very generous on the long finish. I would guess that the wine is at its absolute peak of maturity, and will probably start to fade a bit in the decade to come. 2012-2025. **92.**





### **1970 Rioja “Viña Real” Gran Reserva- Cuné**

The 1970 Viña Real Gran Reserva is a beautiful bottle of Rioja that has still not reached its apogee of peak maturity- even at age forty-four! The excellent nose still has more development to come with further bottle age, but offers up a pure and still fairly primary blend of cassis, dark berries, cigar smoke, nutskin, just a whisper of barnyard, Rioja spice tones and a beautiful base of dark soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with tangy acids, still a bit of backend tannin and outstanding focus and grip on the long, complex and perfectly balanced finish. This is an outstanding vintage of Viña Real Gran Reserva, but I would be tempted to give this still a few more years of bottle age before having at it in earnest, as this wine is still climbing! Fine, fine juice. 2018-2050. **94.**

### **1970 Rioja “Viña Vial”- Federico Paternina**

The 1970 Rioja “Viña Vial” from Federico Paternina is probably the finest wine I have ever tasted from this old line bodega. The bouquet is simply beautiful, delivering an *à point* aromatic constellation of dried cherries and strawberries, nutmeg, cocoa powder, spicy Rioja soil tones, coconutty oak and a nice topnote of savory elements. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very silky, with a succulent core, great, vibrant acidity, modest remaining tannins and a very long, complex and bouncy finish. A beautiful, beautiful wine. 2012-2030+. **94.**

### **1970 Rioja “Monte Real”- Bodegas Riojanas**

The 1970 Monte Real makes a pretty strong statement for giving the superb 1982 version just a bit more bottle age, so it too can reach this lovely point of silky equilibrium. The complex and very perfumed nose wafts from the glass in a fine mix of cherries, strawberries, orange zest, fresh nutmeg, a fine and complex base of soil tones, almond and incipient savory notes of old Rioja. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, silky and fully mature, with no rough edges whatsoever, lovely focus and balance, melting tannins and fine grip on the long and very complex finish. This is a lovely bottle at its zenith of peak drinkability, and though the wine clearly has at least another decade or more of life in it, this is a great moment to be drinking this wine. 2014-2025+. **92.**

### **1968 Rioja “904” Gran Reserva- La Rioja Alta**

The 1968 La Rioja Alta “904” Gran Reserva is a beautiful bottle of wine at its absolute peak of maturity. The pure, vibrant and complex bouquet delivers scents of cherries, raspberries, beautiful Rioja spice tones, nutskin, a beautiful base of soil and a fine, signature note of toasted coconut from the old American cooperage in which the wine was raised back in those days. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and tangy, with lovely mid-palate depth, still a touch of backend tannin and excellent complexity and focus on the very, very long, refined and velvety finish. A beautiful bottle of wine. 2013-2040. **94.**

### **1964 Rioja “Viña Pomal” Reserva Especial- Bodegas Bilbainas**

I have had some lovely bottles of the 1964 Viña Pomal from Bodegas Bilbainas before, but this bottle was probably a touch advanced and not quite as structurally sound as some of the better examples I have tasted. That said, this was still a very tasty wine and clearly shows that this is one of the sleepers in the vintage. Viña Pomal is one of the two great single vineyard bottlings from Bilbainas, located on a gravelly plateau right near Viña Tondonia, at the confluence of the Ebro and Tirón Rivers in Haro. The bouquet of the 1964 Viña Pomal is a complex and perfumed blend of cherries, red plums, clove-like spices, a touch of beef broth, turmeric and nutskins in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex

and still showing a just a bit of remaining tannin on the backend, with a lovely core, solid acids and a long, velvety finish. This bottle was starting to fade a bit, but pristine bottles are still quite vigorous and probably merit two or three points higher score. 2014-2020+? **89.**

#### **1964 Rioja “Viña Zaco” Crianza- Bodegas Bilbainas**

The Viña Zaco bottling from Bodegas Bilbainas is from one of their two prime vineyards in La Rioja Alta, with the soils more chalky clay and river silt than the gravelly, Viña Pomal also owned and bottled on its own by the estate. This is their more elegant single vineyard bottling, and it is rarely seen in older vintages and the 1964 was the first time I had the opportunity to taste it. This particular bottle was getting to the end of its plateau, but I have heard reports of fresher bottles out there and I hope to taste the wine again one day. The bouquet is beautifully mature and complex, offering up scents of dried black cherries, a nice touch of spiced meats, nutty tones, cigar ash, lovely soil nuances and a touch of coconutty old wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and velvety on the attack, with a moderate core and the grip starting to loosen on the long finish. This is still a very tasty bottle, but I am sure perfect bottles are still in their prime. 2012-2020. **88.**

#### **1964 Rioja “Honorable” Gran Reserva- Gomez Cruzado**

The bodega of Gomez Cruzado lies across the street from López de Heredia, but this was the first wine I have ever tasted from them and was very pleasantly surprised by just how lovely it was. The bouquet is deep and quite tertiary in its complexity, wafting from the glass in a red fruity mix redolent of crushed strawberries, cloves, nutskins, coffee, spicy soil tones and fresh herbs in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still quite tangy, with a velvety palate impression, melted tannins and very good grip on the long and still quite vibrant finish. This is lovely juice and one of the sleepers of the fine 1964 Rioja vintage. 2012-2025. **91.**

#### **1964 Rioja “Viña Real” Reserva Especial- Cuné**

The 1964 Viña Real Rioja Reserva Especial from Cuné is a stunning wine at its absolute zenith of peak drinkability. The beautiful, poised and very complex nose wafts from the glass in a refined blend of black cherries, dark plums, walnuts, singed soil tones, fresh thyme, wild fennel, a touch of autumn leaves, a fine base of coconutty oak and a spicy topnote redolent of turmeric. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and velvety, with superb complexity, beautiful mid-palate depth, outstanding focus and balance and a long, pure and *à point* finish of great refinement and breed. There are no tannins remaining here, but this wine is so finely balanced that it should continue to cruise along at this superb plateau for at least a couple of decades. 2014-2040+. **95.**

#### **1964 Rioja Gran Reserva- Faustino X**

I have had some nice, lighter-styled Rioja bottles produced by Faustino X from back in this era, and the 1964 Gran Reserva is a very pretty and silky middleweight. The nose is not spectacular, but nicely resolved in its blend of cherries, nutskin, spicy soil tones, dried herbs and a bit of chocolaty tones that are starting to straddle the line towards oxidation, but have not yet descended in that direction. On the palate the wine is medium-full, suave and silky, with a modest core, diminishing structural elements, but still sneaky length and nice backend persistence to its flavors. This is getting to the far side of the plateau, but is still not a bad drink. 2014-2020+. **87.**

#### **1964 Rioja “Viña Tondonia” Gran Reserva- López de Heredia**

At our 1964 Rioja tasting, the Tondonia bottle was not pristine, but happily, I had tasted the wine at a friend’s home in Germany during my spring trip, so I am pleased to have a note on a perfect bottle of this great wine to include in this article. The wine offers up a simply beautiful

bouquet of cherries, blood orange, walnuts, sweet cigar wrapper, a superbly complex base of soil, brown spices and gentle smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and multi-dimensional, with layer upon layer of complex, a sappy core, great soil inflection, melting tannins and a long, very complex and tangy finish of stunning refinement and vibrancy. A brilliant wine. 2014-2040+. **95.**

**1964 Rioja “Castillo Ygay” Reserva- Marqués de Murrieta**

The 1964 Castillo Ygay Reserva is a very nice wine, with an exotic and extroverted personality on both the nose and palate. This particular bottle was getting towards the end of its plateau- not yet descending, but getting a bit fragile structurally and did fade in the glass after about half an hour. However, during those thirty minutes, there was lots to like here in its aromatic blend of black cherries, toasted coconut, a touch of pomegranate, Rioja spice tones, nutskin, dried herbs and cocoa butter. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and fairly complex, with a good core, melting tannins and a very long, velvety and juicy finish. This is not the most complex of old Riojas, but it has a lot of good things going on in the glass during its full bloom, and there may well be even fresher bottles out there. 2014-2030. **91.**

**1964 Rioja “Viña Albina” Reserva- Bodegas Riojanas**

The 1964 Viña Albina Reserva is a beautiful wine, and as is often the case with this bottling when it is compared to the Monte Real from Bodegas Riojanas, the more red fruity and perfumed side of the Viña Albina is very much in evidence in this fine '64. The complex bouquet delivers a fine blend of cherries, strawberries, fresh nutmeg, a gentle dustiness to its soil component and a bit of nutskin in the upper register. On the palate the wine is medium-full, pure and velvety, with lovely complexity and focus, melted tannins and fine intensity of flavor and balance on the long and poised finish. This does not have the same structural integrity today as the 1964 Monte Real Reserva, but it is so beautifully balanced that it too will continue to cruise along at its apogee for decades to come. A beautifully and very elegant rendition of old Viña Albina, which I have had the pleasure to drink three times in the last year! 2014-2030+. **93.**

**1964 Rioja “Monte Real” Reserva- Bodegas Riojanas**

It had been several years since I last tasted an example of 1964 Monte Real, but over the course of the last twelve months or so, I have had the pleasure to drink this beautiful wine on three occasions, as well as a bottle of the '64 Gran Reserva. This most recent bottle of Reserva was absolutely magical. The deep, pure and vibrant nose soars from the glass in a complex mélange of red and black cherries, a touch of dark berry, Rioja spice tones, fresh nutmeg, woodsmoke and a gentle touch of game. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very suave on the attack, with a superb core of black fruit, a silky texture and outstanding length and grip on the focused and beautifully balanced finish. A beautiful bottle of '64 at its absolute apogee and with years and years of life still ahead of it! 2014-2035+. **95.**

**1964 Rioja “Monte Real” Gran Reserva- Bodegas Riojanas**

I imagine that there is not a dramatic difference in the Reserva and Gran Reserva versions of the 1964 Monte Real, but the lone bottle of the Gran Reserva I have drunk in recent times did seem to be the finest of my encounters with the magical synthesis of Monte Real and the legendary 1964 Rioja vintage. The stunning nose soars from the glass in a red fruity blaze of strawberries, cherries, sweet walnuts, glorious soil tones, dried Rioja spices and a floral topnote that one of our seasoned tasters at the table insisted smelled of cactus flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and absolutely at its zenith, with a great core of sappy red fruit, striking soil signature, still a touch of melting tannin and great focus and grip on the very, very long, very complex and utterly pure finish. A brilliant wine. 2013-2040. **96.**

### **1964 Rioja Reserva- Marqués de Riscal**

Up through the 1973 vintage, Marqués de Riscal was still one of the very top houses in Rioja, and their 1964 Reserva is a lovely example of this vintage. The superb bouquet delivers a classic Riscal blend of dark berries, Rioja spice tones, nutskin, cigar smoke and a marvelously complex base of soil. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very suave on the attack, with a lovely core of fruit, fine complexity and a very long, pure and velvety finish. I love fine old Riscal and the 1964 Reserva is still cruising along at its peak of drinkability. 2014-2035. **92.**

### **1956 Rioja “Viña Albina” Reserva- Bodegas Riojanas**

I had tasted a bottle of the 1956 Viña Albina Gran Reserva a few years ago, but that very pretty bottle was not as pristine as this most recent example. This is a lovely wine that was paired alongside the 1964 Viña Albina Reserva, and though it is not quite as elegant as the 1964 version, it still has plenty of life ahead of it and shows off a lot of positive attributes on both the nose and palate. The bouquet is a bit more black fruity than the 1964, offering up scents of dark berries, plums, a bit of charred wood, a lovely base of soil, savory herb tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite classic, with a fine core of fruit, lovely balance, still a whisper of backend tannin and a long, complex and classy finish. The 1956 Viña Albina is quite different in stylistic profile than the 1964, but it is really impossible to choose a favorite from amongst these two superb old Rioja bottlings. 2014-2030+. **93.**

### **1956 Rioja “Monte Real” Reserva- Bodegas Riojanas**

I had never previously had the pleasure to taste the 1956 Monte Real and the wine is lovely. The fully mature and still quite lively nose offers up scents of red and black cherries, cloves, cinnamon, a touch of nutskin, spicy soil tones and a lovely framing of coconutty American oak. On the palate the wine is pure, still quite full-bodied and complex, with lovely intensity of flavor, melted tannins, fine focus and a long, complex and refined, old wine finish. This does not have the same potential for longevity as the timeless 1964, but this wine still has plenty of life in it as well and is really a classy glass of old Rioja. 2014-2030+? **93.**

### **1955 Rioja “Viña Pomal” Gran Reserva- Bodegas Bilbainas**

The 1955 Viña Pomal Gran Reserva is a beautiful bottle of old Rioja that is still at its apogee and offers up a glorious bouquet of dried black cherries, gamebirds, charred wood, dark chocolate, fresh figs, cigar ash, lovely soil tones and a nice topnote of savory elements that recall things like celery seed. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very complex, with a vibrant core of fruit, still tangy acids, lovely focus and balance and great length and grip on the pure and succulent finish. This wine is still at its peak of drinkability and is a flat out delicious bottle of old Rioja. 2012-2025+. **94.**

### **1954 Rioja- Age Fuenmayor**

I have had one or two older examples from Age Fuenmayor in the past, but this really lovely 1954 is the oldest wine I have yet tasted from this old line estate. This is really a lovely wine that has been fully mature for several decades, but continues to drink very well and offers up plenty of pleasure on both the nose and palate. The bouquet is a mix of plums, cherries, nutskin, sandy soil tones and a nice touch of gentle American oak. On the palate the wine is medium-full, pure and velvety, with lovely complexity, still a vibrant core of sweet fruit, beautiful resolution and a long, complex and fully mature finish. I would not forget about this lovely wine in the cellar for another dozen years, but for drinking over the next five to seven years, there is some lovely pleasure to be had here. 2014-2022+. **89.**

### **1954 Rioja “Viña Bosconia”- López de Heredia**

It had been nearly five years since I last had the pleasure to cross paths with the beautiful 1954 Viña Bosconia, and this most recent bottle seemed as if time had not even touched it since the last time I found this glorious wine in my glass. The bouquet is beautifully refined, wafting from the glass in a blend of cherries, a bit of red plum, coffee, nutskin, gentle notes of clove, a beautifully complex base of soil tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and beautifully complex, with a vibrant core of fruit, outstanding soil signature, tangy acids and a very long, meltingly tannic and *à point* finish. One of my favorite vintages ever for Viña Bosconia! 2014-2050. **95.**

### **1954 Rioja “Viña Tondonia”- López de Heredia**

While I have been fortunate to taste the glorious 1954 Bosconia on a handful of occasions down through the years, this was one of my first bottles of the 1954 Viña Tondonia, as I had previously only crossed paths with this wine once before- a bottle labeled as Gran Reserva- back a couple of years ago. Neither this bottle (nor the 1954 Viña Bosconia (above) was designated Reserva or Gran Reserva, which probably indicates that these bottles were released from the bodega prior to 1982, as they came from a cellar of old Rioja purchased in Spain. This is a beautiful bottle of Rioja at its absolute apogee, offering up a pure and vibrant bouquet of cherries, nutskin, dark soil tones, woodsmoke, a lovely and complex base of Rioja spice tones and an exotic touch of dried eucalyptus. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and vibrant, with a lovely core, outstanding focus and balance and a very long, poised and utterly pristine finish. A great wine. 2014-2050+. **96.**

### **1954 Rioja “Viña Tondonia” Gran Reserva- López de Heredia**

This particular bottle of 1954 Viña Tondonia was labeled as Gran Reserva, which indicates that it is a later release from the bodega. The wine is beautiful, offering up a pure and very tertiary bouquet of cherries, blood orange, nutskin, fresh thyme, mustard seed, a touch of fallen leaves, gentle notes of brown sugar and spicy Rioja soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very silky on the attack, with a sweet core of red fruit, great soil signature, melting tannins and a very long, bright and complex finish. This too was a beautiful showing, but the bottle above, from an old Spanish cellar, was even a hair more vigorous and compelling. 2012-2030+. **94.**

### **1954 Marqués de Murrieta Rioja Reserva**

The 1954 Marqués de Murrieta Rioja Reserva (note that this is not the Castello Ygay bottling) is a really terrific example of this fine vintage, wafting from the glass in a complex and black fruity blend of cassis, dark berries, cigar smoke, very iron-infused soil tones, charred wood and a bit of rare meat. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite masculine in style for an old Rioja, with a fine core of fruit, Murrieta’s typical tangy acids (the bodega acidulated quite aggressively back in this era), melting tannins and great length and grip on the complex and highly satisfying finish. Fine, fine juice. 2012-2030+. **94.**

### **1950 Rioja Gran Reserva- Bodegas Berberana**

The 1950 Rioja Gran Reserva from Bodegas Berberana is a really lovely bottle that is still at its plateau of maturity and drinking splendidly. The complex and utterly classic nose wafts from the glass in a blend of cherries, blood orange, a touch of mincemeat, cloves, spicy soil tones, gentle notes of celery seed and coconutty American oak. On the palate the wine is medium-full, suave and pure, with a fine core of fruit, lovely transparency down to the soil,

sound acids, melted tannins and lovely grip on the long and classy finish. Just a beautiful bottle of old, velvety Rioja. 2012-2025. **91.**

**1942 Rioja “Viña Albina”- Bodegas Riojanas**

The 1942 Viña Albina is a beautiful example of one of my absolute favorite old Rioja vintages. The deep, pure and utterly refined nose wafts from the glass in a blend of cherries, a touch of orange peel, roses, fresh nutmeg, a beautifully complex base of soil tones, Rioja spices and a delicate topnote of nutskin. On the palate the wine is medium-full, pure and perfectly resolved, with great intensity of flavor and complexity, a seamless and suave structure of perfect balance, melted tannins and outstanding length and grip on the silky and very refined finish. This is a beautiful bottle of Rioja that is every bit as young today as the 1964 and 1956 Viña Albinas! 2014-2030+. **93.**

**1942 Rioja “Viña Albina” Vieja Reserva- Bodegas Riojanas**

I am assuming that the Vieja Reserva version of Viña Albina from 1942 is a precursor to the what would be the Gran Reserva of today. I tasted this glorious bottle back in the summer of 2012, and the wine was celebrating its seventieth birthday in splendid style, as it soared from the glass in an absolutely beautiful aromatic constellation of cherries, strawberries, blood orange, fresh nutmeg, Rioja spice tones, a superbly complex base of soil, orange peel and a touch of spiced meats. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and still nicely vibrant, with a lovely core, flawless balance and a very, very long, complex and focused finish that closes with tangy expansiveness and stellar grip. A brilliant bottle of old Rioja from a legendary vintage, the 1942 Viña Albina Vieja Reserva will have no trouble seeing its hundredth birthday. 2012-2040+. **95.**

## EMIDIO PEPE- MONTEPULCIANO'S MAESTRO CELEBRATES HIS FIFTIETH HARVEST



Emidio Pepe is one of the legendary wine producers of Italy. Having just celebrated his fiftieth harvest in 2013, he has been one of the two great winemakers of his region (along with Edoardo Valentini) to absolutely redefine the world's perceptions of how good and how ageworthy can be the red and white wines from this beautiful, mountainous region, just inland from the Adriatic Sea. While I have not had the pleasure (as of yet) to visit the Pepe family at the domaine in Abruzzo, I was very fortunate to be invited to two superb tastings of their wines organized here in New York in May of this year to celebrate *Signor* Pepe's fiftieth year producing these spectacular wines, and I have very happily drunk his wines with great pleasure for many years prior to these two remarkable tastings. The Fiftieth Anniversary celebrations were attended by other important members of the Pepe family who are now in the process of very ably assisting Emidio with the running of the family estate, including his youngest daughter Sofia (who is now making the wines alongside of her father) and his granddaughters, Chiara and Elisa (who is only thirteen, but is very excited to join the family team in the not too distant future). Beyond the extended Pepe family that flew to New York to join in the celebration of fifty harvests for Emidio Pepe, the family left behind in Abruzzo two other members who are also very much an important part of the team that runs the family winery today- Emidio's wife Rosa and their middle daughter, Daniela, who is the mother of granddaughters Chiara and Elisa and oversees the commercial side of the business back home. Emidio and Rosa's oldest of three



daughters, Stefania, runs her own domaine in the region and is one of the few Pepes of the extended family not to be working alongside of Emidio in some capacity today.

The winery is located in the town of Torano Nuova in Abruzzo, where the horizon is dominated by the Apennine Mountain range that runs along the eastern side of the country in this central section of the boot, and the microclimate is also deeply influenced by the Adriatic Sea, which is only fifteen miles away from the estate to the east. This is a very hot wine-growing area in the summer months, with the cooling effect from the Adriatic only felt in the evenings, and some of the more old school viticultural practices that Emidio has followed since the very earliest days of owning his own vineyards has served the family very well in recent years, when the effect of global warming has led to some especially hot growing seasons. These include the continued practice of growing about two thirds of the vines in the traditional pergola system, with the vines trained up high and the leaf canopy above the grapes. In very hot summers (like 2003), the Pepe family can allow the leaf canopy to grow thick on top and provide much needed shade to the bunches below, avoiding sunburned grapes. These days, most of the vineyards of Abruzzo have been transformed from the old pergola system of yesteryear to having the vines planted in trellised rows, so that the vineyards can be easily worked by a tractor during the season and also harvested by machine in the fall. None of this would even cross the mind of Emidio Pepe as acceptable, as he and his family continue to work the vines by hand and hand-harvest everything, as *Signor* Pepe is convinced that the great quality of his wines starts with meticulous attention to detail in the vines. As the family winery has needed to expand their vineyard holdings in the last several years, it has not always been possible to purchase vines that are still trained on pergolas, and so about a third of their own vineyards are now also planted in rows. However, in very hot years like 2003, the family has sold off all of their production from these vineyards planted in rows, as they were not deemed to be anywhere near the same quality as their grapes grown on the pergolas in these hot years and would never make the grade to be included in a wine that bears the label of Emidio Pepe!

Emidio Pepe has been a maverick producer since his very first vintage of 1964, vehemently declining to produce wines in the more forward and early-drinking style that defines the vast, vast majority of examples of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, preferring to make very long-lived, individualistic and magical wines from his fifteen hectares of vines. During our dinner, he was asked at what point in the history of the winery did he feel certain that he had found the right path to make such long-lived and reference point examples of Montepulciano, and he responded, "right from the very first vintage in 1964, once that wine went into bottle I absolutely *knew* that this was the right way to make these wines and that they would age for a very, very long time." In the very first commercial vintages, he started out by taking over the small, roughly one hectare family vineyard of Montepulciano that had been worked by his grandfather and father, and then augmented this production by purchasing grapes from nearby farmers to get him started in those early days of winemaking. He had already been acting as a broker for quite some time, selling grapes for farmers in the area, and had developed a deft touch of identifying who had the best *terroirs* and older vines around Torano Nuova, so he brought considerable expertise to this endeavor when it came time for him to start purchasing grapes to make his own wines. If he is still considered a maverick today, just imagine how foreign his belief in the aging potential for Montepulciano must have seemed back in the mid-1960s! From the very beginning, he had a vision of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo as a very long-lived wine that had the capability to age and

improve in the bottle over many, many decades (provided it was vinified in a manner consistent with this aim) and compete with the most famous red wines of Italy from regions such as Piemonte, Tuscany or Campania. At this time, the only other winemaker in the region that was making wines with the intent of producing very long-lived and serious Montepulcianos was Edoardo Valentini, who had started just a few years before Emidio Pepe (*Signor* Valentini's first vintage was 1956), but *Signor* Valentini's true passion was really for the white wine of the region, Trebbiano d'Abruzzo, and it really must be credited to *Signor* Pepe for being the first to have the vision of Montepulciano as a long-aging wine that could be ranked right up there with the very best red wines of Italy. At the time, back in 1964, his championing of this singularly beautiful red wine would have made most of his neighbors think that he was absolutely crazy to do so. However, time has proven that *Signor* Pepe was absolutely right about the potential for this wonderful grape of Montepulciano, and fifty years on, his wines stand up proudly as a testimony to his insight and inspiration.

Emidio Pepe originated from a family of farmers and he was very close to his grandfather (also named Emidio Pepe) in his youth, whom he loved to spend time with out in the vines. However, in his boyhood, Emidio never really had the same warm relationship with his rather stern father, Giuseppe. He set out on his career path as a very young man, first working on the family farm, and then for other domaines in the region in his early teens and eventually setting up on his own in time to produce wines in the 1964 vintage. First and foremost he was a vineyard man, loving to work the vines in the hot summer days of Abruzzo, and like so many of the farms back in this era, his grandfather's *cascina* was run on a mixed agricultural base, with the portion of land dedicated to grapes producing about three tons of Montepulciano grapes per year. Emidio's grandfather sold off his grape production each autumn, with the exception of one barrel of wine that he made and kept for family consumption. This was very much the norm in rural Italy in this era, and as was also the typical for younger boys Abruzzo at the time, Emidio began his working life at a very young age, giving up school and beginning to work full-time in the fields at age ten. According to the fine new book, Emidio Pepe, The Man and His Wines, by Sandro Sangiorgi, by the time he was thirteen years of age, he was already working for other farmers in the township and was becoming renowned for his skill in the vines, particularly when it came to pruning and training the vines to the pergolas in the fields. Family life was often quite tense at the home farm, with his grandfather quite a strict patriarch and his father equally headstrong, so that arguments between the two generations often left the family air so thick one could cut it with a knife. These tensions would eventually lead Emidio to chart his own course as a young man, and eventually the cellar became his private domaine and the other family members who might be allowed down here to watch were never allowed to weigh in on decision making as it pertained to the wines.

I have to imagine that the tensions between Emidio's grandfather and father, and later between his father and himself, led to his very strong vein of self-sufficiency that has characterized his career as a winemaker from the very beginning, and no doubt played such a significant role in how he came to produce his Montepulcianos and Trebbianos in such a unique manner. As Emidio likes to say, "from the very beginning of the winery, I have always liked to do everything myself." He has always retained his great passion for work in the vineyards that he acquired as a young boy, but he has developed a very unique cellar protocol for his winemaking techniques over the years that dovetails nicely with his exceptionally sensitive feel for the vines.

For there is nothing typical in his production of either his red wines or his white wines, and I suspect that if there is even a single grower in Abruzzo that replicates the methods of Emidio Pepe in the cellars, then this is only because of the great respect that he has earned over the course of his long career through the transcendental quality of his wines. For example, his Montepulciano grapes are entirely de-stemmed by hand (pushing the bunches through a wide screen to free the berries from the stems, without damaging the grapes) and still crushed by foot. Emidio's granddaughter Chiara likes to joke that "visitors are most welcome around harvest time" and certainly allowed to try their hand- or feet- at this ancient practice. After the grapes are pressed, they are run off into glass-lined, cement fermentation tanks for their fermentations, and the wines will also be aged in these same glass-lined cement tanks all the way up to their bottling. Indigenous yeasts have been used exclusively for the Emidio Pepe wines since the very first vintage, and the wines are generally racked one time off of their gross lees at the end of fermentation (again, back into cement tanks), where they are aged until they are ready for bottling. The Montepulcianos here tend to be bottled on the early side, after eighteen to twenty-four months in tank (depending on the structural style of the vintage), with no fining, filtration or additions of SO<sub>2</sub>, and then are stacked in the cellars and a large percentage of the annual production of the reds is held back for long bottle aging before they are released into the market.

Since the very beginning, fermenting and aging in glass-lined cement tanks has been very important for *Signor* Pepe and remains one of the cornerstones of his cellar philosophy. As his business expanded in the 1970s, with more clients beginning to discover the superb quality of his wines, he needed to find more cement tanks to cover his growing production needs. He had no desire to follow the trend to move away from cement to stainless steel tanks for fermenting and oak barrels for aging of the wines, and he happily purchased cement tanks from neighboring wineries as they made the transition to stainless steel fermentation tanks. Emidio notes that "if you pay attention to the wine, it will quickly tell you that it is not happy being raised in stainless steel tanks, as it always throws off tartrates in stainless steel, which is a sign that the wine is trying to protect itself from the tank wall." He continues, "when you ferment and age your wines in glass-lined cement tanks, it does not develop any tartrates, which is a sign that it is very much at home in its container and this also makes the transition of the wine to the bottle less traumatic." Once again, Emidio Pepe has gone his own way, no matter what the prevailing winds might be blowing across the hills of Abruzzo, and the stellar quality of his wines is a pretty good sign that it would pay to listen to his theories!

Emidio Pepe did not set out as a young man to be solely a winemaker, but it was during an extended stay in Holland with a family that grew table grapes that he began to realize that to make a decent living on the family farm in Abruzzo, he was going to need to focus almost exclusively on wine as his cash crop. This was in 1960, when even the finest Baroli and Barbaresci were still selling for very low prices, and one could often buy a bottle of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo from one of the cooperatives in the region for the same price as a bottle of water! Emidio was way ahead of his time in having a vision for the future of the wine business that was far different from what he knew in the 1960s, and when he returned to Torano Nuova after his stay in Holland, he knew that he was going to have to focus most of his energies on winemaking. At the time, he was working as a supervisor for a local cooperative in the region, Marozzi di Martiniscuro, and he began to imagine producing and bottling his own wine. His first few vintages produced after his return from Holland were done on an experimental basis, when

the cooperative he was working at had some left-over grapes that were not going to be used. Emidio took them home to the cellars at his family farm and began his winemaking journey with these leftovers, and at this time he also began to read voraciously about winemaking. Within three years of his first experimental attempts at winemaking, he was ready to start buying grapes from some of his neighbors to augment the small tonnage he got from the family farm's one hectare of Montepulciano vines and begin to commercialize his wines in bottle with the 1964 vintage. Starting out in 1964, Emidio produced both Trebbiano and Montepulciano, with of course, all of the white grapes having to be purchased, as there was none planted on the small family vineyard around the winery. The first few vintages were labeled under the name of Aurora- perhaps in a nod to his wife Rosa, whose nickname during her days as a school teacher before marrying Emidio had been Aurora- but by the 1967 vintage, the label simply said Montepulciano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe (or Trebbiano). It is an interesting coincidence that his first vintage of 1964 is also the year that Rosa and Emidio were married. Emidio had already come a long way from his early teens, as he had gone back to school at age sixteen to perfect his Italian (most rural families in the region spoke the local dialect of *Abruzzi* at home and learned Italian in school) and was already an important figure for the younger generation of farmers in his area. But, by 1964, he saw his and Rosa's future tied firmly to winemaking and he charged ahead with great alacrity.



*September morning fogs clearing over the vineyards in Torano Nuova, with the Adriatic in the background.*

In his earliest days of selling his own wines, Emidio Pepe was considered absolutely crazy by most local wine producers, as his wines were far more pricey than the prevailing prices of the other individual producers' wines or those from the local cooperatives. No one expected that he would be able to sell his wines, but he would dutifully load up his car with samples and go from restaurant to restaurant in Abruzzo and Marche in those early days, cheerfully pouring his wines and occasionally getting an order. These days, the Pepe family routinely holds back a large percentage of their production for extended aging in the cellars, but in the very first years of the winery, this of course, would not have been possible for Emidio, and one can imagine the surprise that his deeper, more structured style of Montepulciano would have generated amongst the potential clients he visited. There were a percentage of people who could quickly appreciate the special quality of his wines and would place orders, while others would politely decline to buy, but all through these early sales calls, Emidio Pepe would diligently continue on and not get discouraged by those who did not understand his wines, and slowly he began to build up an appreciative clientele amongst the restaurants in the two provinces. In the early 1970s, the Abruzzo regional wine association scheduled a trip to the United States to try and promote the wines of their region, and invited those who they felt were the most important producers in Abruzzo to show their wines on this trip- Emidio was not one of the winemakers to receive an invitation to go! This spurred him on to start looking for new markets outside of Italy, and he organized and paid for his own American trip shortly thereafter, and then began to expand his markets on the continent of Europe, focusing primarily on Germany and Holland. As he had done visiting the restaurants in Abruzzo early on, Emidio Pepe loaded up the car with samples and he and Rosa would hit the road to find Italian restaurants in these other European countries that might be open to his serious interpretation of Montepulciano. Over time, these became very important markets for him.

This "do it yourself" attitude has been pervasive in every aspect of Emidio Pepe's success over the years, and he has every right to look back on the last fifty years with great satisfaction. He has always been his own man, whether this meant making his Montepulciano and Trebbiano in his own unique way, or crisscrossing Europe with a car full of samples to find clients, and his singular focus on doing things as he deems right, rather than the conventional wisdom of the day, is certainly quite evident in his viticultural philosophy. As the winery began to really grow in the 1970s, Emidio Pepe first had to look to his neighbors to supply the larger number of grapes he needed for his growing clientele, and he was an expert in sourcing the very finest grapes to be found in the region. His preference has always been for the vineyards around Torano Nuova, as he is convinced that this is the finest *terroir* in Abruzzo, but of even more importance is how the vineyards are trellised, as he wanted to buy grapes that were trained on the old-fashioned Pergola system of high, overhead wires, rather than those grown in rows along the ground in the more modern style. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the pergola system was still favored in Abruzzo, as it tended to give the possibility of higher yields, and it was only at the dawn of the 1980s that this fashion changed to vineyards planted at higher densities in rows. Emidio Pepe has almost always preferred the pergola-trained grapes for his wines, as he feels that the ability they afford to manage the leaf canopy in the very hot summers in Abruzzo is critical to protecting the grapes from sunburn, and he is not overly concerned with low yields, as he finds that balance in the grapes is more important for the finished wines than any additional concentration that might be realized from lower yields.

During the decade of the 1970s, it became clear to *Signor* Pepe that he was going to have to start buying and planting more vineyard land to keep up with demand, and if he wanted to keep using grapes grown with the pergola system, then he was going to have to plant them himself. The original family vineyard, which lies next to the winery, is now about a hectare and a half in size and planted entirely with Montepulciano. Over the years, the Pepe family has been able to build upon this and now cultivates fifteen hectares of vines, with about two-thirds of these still trained on the pergola system. Of these fifteen hectares of vineyards, nine and a half hectares are Montepulciano, one hectare is committed to a new white wine variety for the family, Pecorino, and the balance is Trebbiano. Every vineyard that Emidio Pepe has purchased over the years he has bought unplanted and put in his own vines, so that today, fully seventy percent of the family's Montepulciano vineyards are planted on the pergola system, with thirty percent now planted in rows. For their Trebbiano, the split is fifty-fifty between pergola-trained vineyards and those on trellised rows. As Emidio's granddaughter Chiara explains, the family likes to have a mix of the two vineyard planting types, "for with both white and red, the pergola is very good in the sunny seasons, because the grapes get ripe in the shade and they don't burn." However, she notes that "in the rainy seasons it is better to have rows, because more air flows through the bunches and this prevents diseases and molds, so that having both allows us to balance our production both in rainy and sunny seasons." This is very important, as the Peopes do not use any chemical sprays in the vineyards and are now completely *biodynamique* in their viticulture.

The change over to *biodynamique* farming principals was initiated by Emidio's daughter Sofia, as when she started to become acquainted with the tenets of this farming philosophy around 2005, she realized that the family had essentially been doing almost all of their farming previously on a very organic basis, were already organizing their viticulture and winemaking calendars to the phases of the moon and the transition *biodynamism* was going to be very minimal, as they were essentially ninety percent of the way there already. Emidio Pepe was initially a bit skeptical of the change, but, ever the seasoned vineyard hand, he has been very much supportive since observing that the quality of the grapes coming in from the vines these days is even better under *biodynamique* farming. For many years now, the Pepe family has owned sufficient vineyard land to support their production needs, and the days when *Signor* Pepe used his finely-honed skills identifying the best vineyards and grapes to buy are now long in the past. Back in the old days, when he needed to purchase grapes to support his customer's orders, he "always liked to buy from producers who he knew and whose vineyard work he respected" notes Chiara Pepe, "but for many years, we have grown all the grapes ourselves that we have needed for our production and do not buy or sell grapes." However, she is quick to point out that there are exceptions to this, in years where the Pepe feels that the vintage is not strong enough to make wines at the very high family standards, and in those years, they will sell off production from vineyards that they do not think have made sufficiently fine grapes to produce great wine. So, for example, in the torrid 2003 vintage, all of the grapes grown in the family vineyards planted to rows were sold off, as the grapes were far more sun-burned than those grown under the shady pergola system.

One thing I should touch upon is that Emidio Pepe has for many, many years produced two distinct bottlings of Montepulciano, a *Normale* bottling and a *Riserva* bottling. The trouble is that he has never seen any reason to label the two wines differently! Here in the US, where I have drunk most of my Emidio Pepe wines, everything sold is a *Riserva* bottling (though my

original introduction to *Signor Pepe's* wines, many years ago, was given to me by a dear friend in Germany who shares my passion for Italian wines- *felin danke* Markus!), and the *Normale* is reserved exclusively for the Italian home market. I asked Chiara Pepe about this and she told me that “the *Riserva* and the *Normale* are vinified at the same exact way, with the same timing and same period of picking at harvest,” and the only “difference is that into the *Riserva* usually goes the best wine coming from our older vineyards, and it’s fermented and aged separately in different concrete tanks and is then hand-bottled.” She continued, “the *Riserva* goes in the (bottle) aging cellar and it is not released before it is nine to ten years-old, after we have decanted the wine,” whereas, “the *Normale*, is made with grapes coming from the younger vines, always fermented in concrete but, not hand-bottled, and of course, it is released without decanting- because younger wine doesn’t need to be decanted.” She is quick to point out that the *Normale* is released only in Italy, three years after the harvest, with the majority of their production of Montepulciano being the *Riserva* bottling. Typically, at least fifty percent of the production for the Montepulciano will be *Riserva*, and in great years like 2001, seventy to eighty percent of the production will go to the *Riserva* and be tucked away in the cellar for long bottle aging. With the tasting notes that follow, the 2010 and 2007 Montepulciano bottlings were actually *Riservas* that were pulled from the family cellars and shipped over specifically for the tasting, so I do not have notes on any of the *Normale* versions here, though Chiara Pepe is quick to point out that “the difference is tiny (between the two bottlings), but, there is some- especially for us, who taste those wines every day.”

Above, I talked a bit about Emidio Pepe’s winemaking techniques for his beautiful Montepulciano bottlings. Not surprisingly, *Signor Pepe's* approach to his Trebbiano is equally unique, as he insists that the white grapes here must also be crushed by foot. Legend had it that for the Trebbiano, he only allowed the grapes to be crushed by the feet of young women, as it was reported that he was convinced that their lighter body weight “allows only the ripest grapes to be crushed and provide juice for the wine,” but in reality, both men and women trod the grapes in large wooden tubs for the Trebbiano. However, Chiara Pepe is quick to point out that “yes, it is exactly true that only the ripe berries get crushed by foot-trodding, because the weight of a person makes for a very gentle pressure, so if there are any unripe berries, they are stronger and do not break and this method keeps the acidity from getting too high in the Trebbiano” because the less ripe grapes remain unbroken by foot trodding. The wine is then fermented with indigenous yeasts in the similar glass-lined cement tanks that are used for the Montepulciano, and then allowed to rest until the following March after the harvest. At this point, the family winemaking team of Emidio and Sofia Pepe taste the vats and decide which are to be made into *Riserva* and which are to be the lots designated as Trebbiano *Normale*. Typically, only thirty percent of the Trebbiano production from the Pepes these days will go to their *Riserva* program. For the wines that are to be bottled as *Normale*, they will spend the next year in their cement tanks, prior to being bottled and prepared for the market. The Trebbiano *Riserva* lots are bottled earlier (right after the March tastings) and then allowed to stand up in bottle for the next two years and undergo malolactic fermentation while in the bottle! Truly a unique way to make Trebbiano.

I asked the family about the Trebbiano *Normale* bottling and whether or not it too underwent malolactic fermentation, and Chiara Pepe replied that “for the normal Trebbiano- and also for the Pecorino- we do not control or put any bacteria to assist the malo fermentation to



start, and most of the time it depends of the temperature outside of the cellars.” For this reason, sometimes the Trebbiano *Normale* and the Pecorino will undergo malolactic fermentation in the cement tanks prior to bottling, whereas, in cooler springs, the wines will not undergo malo. The family is quite content to allow nature to take its course as far as malo is concerned for these wines. For the Trebbiano *Riserva*, the malo almost always occurs after the wines have been bottled, and I was curious if this caused too much pressure on the bottles and if the family had to take any special precautions to ensure that the corks were not pushed or the bottles broken by this unique process. Chiara replied that “for the Trebbiano *Riserva*, we don't need to use special bottles, since the carbonic dioxide produced during the malolactic fermentation is very delicate and not too strong- because it a natural process- and it does not push out the cork.” Given how beautifully long the Pepe family’s Trebbiano *Riserva* ages, I have to imagine that allowing the malo to take place after bottling and trapping a bit of CO<sub>2</sub> in the process helps assist in giving these wines such great longevity. I have never tasted the also very long-lived wines from Eduardo Valentini, and I would love to find out if he too follows this practice. In any event, I only have notes back to the 2001 vintage for the Pepe Trebbiano *Riserva* bottling, but believe me, that wine is fresh as a daisy at age twelve and still has decades of life ahead of it, so I have no difficulties believing reports that Emidio Pepe’s Trebbiano *Riserva* can last thirty years or more!

Emidio likes to say that he must watch every step of the winemaking process for the Montepulciano, taking great care to be precise and pay close attention to the wines along the way (“listening to the wine” as he likes to say), but for the Trebbiano, he feels he does not really have to do anything special and it often seems to him that the quality of the white wine here is just a gift of nature. *Signor* Pepe first began producing his Trebbiano in his inaugural vintage of 1964, but as his granddaughter, Chiara observes, “he did not think, at that time, that the Trebbiano could age as well as his Montepulciano, so he did not stock any bottles to age in the cellars and the oldest Trebbiano bottles that we now have left are the 1974, despite the fact that he started making both the red and the white wines since the beginning.” There is now a second white wine in the Emidio Pepe portfolio, as the family planted a vineyard to the Pecorino grape in 2007 and produced their first commercial release of Pecorino in the fine 2010 vintage. This is always the first vineyard to be picked by the Pepe family, as it ripens briskly at the end of the summer, with the sugars soaring and the acids falling in conjunction, so that its very high acidity during the growing season is seldom found in the finished wine without very careful monitoring. Typically, the Pepes will pick their Pecorino in late August, well before their Trebbiano and Montepulciano. The grape variety was nearly extinct until its recent renaissance, though it is indigenous to Abruzzo and used to grow primarily in the foothills of the Apennine Mountains. It was rescued in the 1980s and has undergone a resurgence in popularity in the Italian market, but Emidio is not a big fan of the grape and feels that the Trebbiano has far more character, though he does caution that their vines of Pecorino are still young, so maybe more character will emerge as the vineyards get older. In contrast to the Pecorino, the Trebbiano is typically collected in mid-September and the Montepulciano anywhere from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> of October, depending on the growing season.

Another of the very unique aspects of Emidio Pepe’s winemaking traditions- which of course is now carried on by the younger generations also working alongside their father or grandfather- is the hand-decanting of every single bottle of *Riserva* Montepulciano that is sold

from the winery. Since the winery began to garner some fame and it became possible to hold back more of the production for the *Riserva* wines and age them in bottle in the cellars, the work of hand-decanting each and every bottle has been done by Emidio's wife, Rosa Pepe. She holds the bottle up against a sunny window in the winery that allows her to see the level of sediment, and she pours the old Montepulciano to a fresh bottle, discarding the wine that has sediment in it. Emidio estimates that for every ten bottles of *Riserva* that they sell, it takes twelve bottles to be decanted, as they lose a percentage of each bottle and always top off with the same vintage that is being ordered. Once the old bottles of *Riserva* are decanted into their new bottles, they are then hand-labeled (again by Rosa), before they are prepared for sale. This is a very unique approach to selling old wine, as the wine is effectively racked one more time prior to being sold, but often at ages that range from nine years-old to twenty-five or thirty years of age! But, it clearly works. I have had some bottles of older Montepulciano from Emidio Pepe that have had a fair bit of volatile acidity to them, and *Signor* Pepe feels that it is a mistake to decant these wines once they are being served, as he prefers to open the bottles up several hours before serving to allow the VA to blow off, rather than decanting the wine. In the past, I had always decanted these wines, but as there is effectively little or no sediment in them (having already been decanted at the winery prior to release), I am going to switch my routine for these wines in the future and follow *Signor* Pepe's advice. I should note that at our two large tastings here in New York, with the wines served along the Pepe family's recommendations, we did not find a single bottle that showed any signs of volatile acidity when prepared for serving by long aeration in the bottle, and perhaps my decanting them in the past was counter-productive.



*The bottle aging cellars at Cantina Emidio Pepe, where time works its magic.*

Emidio Pepe is now eighty-two years of age, and will turn eighty-three later this year. He has worked alongside of his wife Rosa since the beginning of the winery in 1964, as she used to load up the car with him and take those long sales drives together across Europe looking for good homes for their bottles of Trebbiano and Montepulciano, and she still does all of the hand-decanting of the old wines prior to release. Emidio now works very closely with two of his three daughters, Daniela and Sofia, and increasingly, also two of his granddaughters, Chiara, who has been in charge of their export clients now for three years, and Elisa, who is poised to join the family team when she is just a bit older. The family transition from generation to generation here has already long been in place, as Sofia estimates “that I have worked with my father now for twenty-five years and he has allowed me to be the primary winemaker here for the last ten vintages” she is now the person in charge of the cellars (with Emidio’s constant companionship and consultation) and Daniela has been running the business side of the winery for nearly as long. The next generation will also likely have the first grandson joining the family winery team, as young Alessandro Pepe seems to be on a path to also help play a part in the running this thriving family enterprise in the future. It is a far cry from the very early days, when Emidio had his father helping him out in the vineyards, with the two having patched up their relationship (to a point) by the early 1970s, but Emidio was emphatic in those early days that no one was allowed to offer any suggestions or criticisms of how things were being run in the cellars in those days. As a matter of fact, having spent a bit of time with the family this past May, it seems likely that Emidio is still very, very particular about cellar practices even today, and he and Sofia make a good team together, as long as the “family traditions” of winemaking and *elevage* are properly respected! For Emidio Pepe, like his forebears, is the captain of his ship, and even as he starts to think a bit about the autumn of his days as a winemaker, he can be content that his family is very well-established in the estate that he founded back in 1964 and very, very firmly committed to keeping things just the way he has always liked them to be. And why not, with the legacy of great wines that he has fashioned and the millions of wine lovers across the globe that he has touched with his brilliant wines- and the perceptions about Montepulciano and Trebbiano that he has utterly changed along the way- this *Maestro* of Montepulciano has an awful lot to be proud of as he gets ready to celebrate his eighty-third birthday. No doubt there will be some mature Trebbiano and Montepulciano available to mark the occasion at the family table in Torano Nuova, as there was in very generous quantities when we marked his fiftieth harvest here in New York in May!

*This report is based almost entirely on the wines I had the pleasure to taste at two in-depth events organized here by Emidio Pepe’s fine New York importer, Polaner Selections, in conjunction with the Pepe family. The events were conceived to celebrate Emidio Pepe’s Fiftieth Anniversary as the Maestro of Montepulciano, and the lineup was truly breathtaking in its depth and breadth of older vintages. Doug Polaner even generously poured from his own cellar his last bottle of Emidio’s first vintage of Montepulciano, the 1964, at the family dinner the evening before the big vertical tasting, so that attendees there could have the opportunity to taste the inaugural vintage, as the wine was also being shown the following day to another group of guests. I have augmented the notes from the tasting with other bottles of Emidio Pepe’s wines that I have tasted in the last couple of years, if a note on that particular vintage was wanting from the big tastings here in New York in May. My sincere thanks to the Pepe family and Doug Polaner for their extraordinary generosity and including me in these historic occasions. I have been lucky enough to attend some truly magnificent tastings over the years, but these two days of*

*immersion in the magical wines of Emidio Pepe and his family certainly rank right up at the very pinnacle of tastings with which I have been involved, and I will cherish my memories of savoring so many magical wines with Signor Pepe and his family over the course of these two days.*

### **Pecorino**

#### **2010 Pecorino- Emidio Pepe**

This grape variety is currently the rage in Abruzzo, but Emidio Pepe is more agnostic than fervent believer in its ultimate potential. The vineyard that was planted to Pecorino is young and 2010 is the first vintage, as the vines were planted in 2007, and he is trying to stay optimistic about its potential, once the vines are a little older. Ironically, it is this grape is far more popular in the market today than Trebbiano, though the latter grape is far more serious to my palate. The 2010 Pepe Pecorino offers up a bright nose of tart orange, a dollop of pineapple, a nice base of salty soil, a bit of leanness and a nice touch of resinous tones in the upper register. On the palate the wine is medium-full, crisp and reasonably complex, with bright acids and fine focus and grip on the fairly long finish. A nice pleasant wine- the 2010 Pecorino from the Pepe family is one of those that did undergo malo in tank prior to bottling. 2014-2020. **89.**

### **Trebbiano d'Abruzzo**

*Though I only have a handful of notes on the superb Trebbiano d'Abruzzo from Emidio Pepe, this should not be construed as suggesting that this beautiful wine is an afterthought at the estate, as it too is one of the greatest wines of Italy. While I tend to drink more of the family's Montepulciano than I do its Trebbiano, this is a superb wine that ages beautifully and on my list of necessary future tastings is a deep vertical of Emidio Pepe's Trebbiano, as I am sure that these wines age very, very long as well, and are brilliant with extended bottle age. It is good to have goals, and one of mine now is to be able to report firsthand on just how beautifully the Trebbiano Riserva from Emidio Pepe drinks at advanced ages- perhaps a tasting can be organized when I get a chance to visit the family winery in Torano Nuova?*

#### **2009 Trebbiano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

The 2009 Trebbiano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe is a classic example of this iconic white wine, wafting from the glass in a complex and classy mélange of orange, a touch of green olive, fresh rosemary, salty soil tones and a topnote of orange peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and nascently complex, with a rock solid core, excellent focus and grip, great backend texture and a long, snappy and very refined finish. A beautiful bottle of Trebbiano that is already approachable, but is still climbing in quality and will be even better to drink in five to ten years! 2014-2035+. **92+.**

#### **2004 Trebbiano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

The 2004 Trebbiano from the Pepe family is another consistently superb wine that I have had the pleasure to drink on a couple of occasions here in New York in the last few years. The wine is deep, complex and still almost youthful in its aromatic profile, offering up a fine blend of lemon zest, green olives, marinated orange peel, lovely soil tones, beeswax and the first stirrings of honeycomb in the upper register that will probably also get a bit nutty as the wine ages. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and shows off lovely mid-palate depth, with superb acids, excellent focus and grip and a very long, complex and soil-driven finish. A beautiful bottle that is drinking very well today, but has years and years still in front of it. 2012-2030. **93.**

## **2002 Trebbiano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

2002 was a cool vintage in Abruzzo and this characteristic perfectly dovetails with what I love best in dry white wines, as the wine has retained a lovely sense of raciness and a bit of “cooler aromatic exotica” on both the nose and palate. The superb bouquet offers up scents of tart orange, citrus oils, a gentle touch of menthol, a gorgeous base of white soil tones and a topnote of corn flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and very beautifully balanced, with a lovely core of fruit, outstanding focus and balance and a very, very long, complex and classy finish. A superb wine in its prime, but with decades of life still ahead of it. 2015-2035. **94.**

## **2001 Trebbiano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

The 2001 Trebbiano d'Abruzzo from Emidio Pepe is a beautiful bottle of wine that is now at its apogee of peak maturity, but should have no troubles cruising along at this lovely level for another fifteen years or more. The superb bouquet offers up a beautiful blend of apples, fresh almond, gentle nuttiness, green olives, complex soil tones, white flowers, fresh rosemary and a bit of lemon peel in the upper register. On the palate the wine is fullish, complex and vibrant, with a lovely core of fruit, bright acids, excellent focus and superb length and grip on the pure and dancing finish. A superb vintage of the Pepe family's Trebbiano. 2012-2030. **93.**

## **Montepulciano d'Abruzzo Riserva**

*The Montepulciano d'Abruzzo Riserva from Emidio Pepe is truly one of Italy's most brilliant red wines, and I was absolutely humbled to be invited to take part in the family's celebration of Signor Pepe's Fiftieth Anniversary. In my experience, these beautiful wines start to really drink well around age ten or twelve, but this does not mean that they have reached their apogees of maturity, which I generally find tends to arrive once the wine has reached its twentieth or twenty-fifty birthday- depending on how structured the vintage was at the outset. Monsieur Pepe certainly loves the deeper and more structured years- his current great favorite is the 2001 vintage- and like many long-time winemakers, he is not opposed to drinking these wines a bit earlier on in their evolutionary cycles than I would be inclined to do with the same wines in my own cellar. As I noted above, this wine sometimes shows quite a bit of volatile acidity when an older one is served, which is something that Emidio Pepe feels is not that important, as he suggests that it will almost always blow off if the wines are given sufficient time to breath. I observed that I have always decanted these wines prior to serving, but am going to now try the Pepe family's method of long, slow oxidation in bottle, rather than decanting, and see if my results can show the great consistency that the Montepulcianos displayed at our two tastings in May. I should also talk a bit about the style of these wines, as they seem to uniformly show a very unique characteristic that I find very attractive in the wines, but have not perhaps described adequately in the tasting notes that follow. There is a signature aromatic and flavor note to a great many vintages of the Emidio Pepe Montepulciano which I have described as “botanicals” in the notes that follow, and which most probably could be found in a great many of the aperitivos that are produced throughout the country.*



*I am indebted to Levi Dalton, former sommelier extraordinaire at Alto here in New York and currently host of the fine Podcast show, “I’ll Drink To That” (amongst his myriad of other activities), who enlightened me a bit about this component in a great many classic Italian wines while we were co-hosting a Barolo tasting together a couple of months back. As Levi so accurately pointed out, the Italians have a great love for a combination of sweet and bitter flavors in their cuisine, and which no other culture really has an analogous characteristic, and one can find this very often in the red wines that they produce. This element is very much in evidence in the great Montepulcianos from Emidio Pepe- the synthesis of sweet and bitter elements- and I find this prevalent in both the aromatics and the flavors of these beautiful wines and have tried to describe this quality with the moniker of “botanicals” in the tasting notes that follow. The term does not really do justice to this uniquely Italian element in the wines, but I did not*

*want to use the term bitter with any frequency as part of the description, as it has pejorative connotations in English language discussion of wines, and this would not be fair, as this element is a very important component in both the bouquet and flavor profile of this great wine and it is certainly not a characteristic that I would call unappealing. It is just very unique to a great many Italian red wines (and much prized by their palates) and very much a part of the beautiful Montepulcianos produced by the Pepe family, and I hope I have been able to describe it sufficiently well in the notes that follow.*

### **2010 Montepulciano d’Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

The 2010 Montepulciano from Emidio Pepe has absolutely brilliant potential, and it is very easy to see why both Emidio and his daughter Sofia are so excited about the quality of this vintage. The bouquet is deep, pure and youthfully promising, offering up scents of black cherries, tar, balsam boughs, a fine base of dark soil, incipient notes of botanicals and a bit of chicory in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nascently complex, with a fine core, firm, ripe tannins, tangy acids and a very long, focused and beautifully balanced finish that closes with excellent grip and bounce. This is still very early days for this wine, but it will prove to be an utter classic. 2025-2075. **95.**

### **2007 Montepulciano d’Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

The 2007 vintage of Montepulciano from the Pepe family shows the warm character of this vintage, and it seems a touch on the short side out of the blocks and one of the least classic recent vintages for this superb bottling. The ripe and currently quite closed nose reluctantly offers up scents of black cherries, road tar, a bit of espresso, dark soil tones, cherry pit and



blossoming notes of botanicals. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish and quite primary, with ripe, moderate tannins, good, but not great depth at the core, and perfectly respectable length and grip on the moderately long finish. Perhaps this wine is just in a very shut down phase and I am underestimating it a bit, but it seems to me that this is unlikely to be one of the great classics of this very successful decade at the winery. But, that said, lesser vintages such as the 1993 showed very well at our vertical tastings, so perhaps all this wine will need is some time in the cellar to find its own pathway. 2018-2035+. **89+?**

#### **2005 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

The 2005 Emidio Pepe Montepulciano is a great vintage of this wine in the making, as it soars from the glass in a youthful blaze of black cherries, bitter chocolate, new leather, gentle notes of tariness, lovely botanical tones (like a fine *aperitivo*) and a fine base of dark soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still quite primary, with a great core of sappy black fruit, ripe, beautifully-integrated tannins, fine focus and a very long, youthful and superb finish. All this beauty needs is time in the cellar to fully blossom, and it is likely to give the exceptional 2010 vintage a run for its money over the coming three or four decades! 2023-2075. **94+.**

#### **2003 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

I had the opportunity to taste the 2003 at both tastings in May, with the bottle that received longer aeration on the evening of the first dinner really showing beautifully, but with the second bottle the following day showing a bit more of the roasted ripeness of this torrid vintage (but it did not receive anywhere near the same length of aeration). As Emidio and Sofia Pepe noted, in this vintage they only used grapes from their pergola-trained vineyards for this bottling, where they retained a far thicker leaf canopy than customary to shade the grapes from the scorching sun, and they were available to avoid sun burn for their grapes by this methodology. In their vineyards planted in rows, they had sunburnt grapes and sold them all off to a cooperative. I am assuming that the first bottle I tasted (with ideal aeration time) was representative of the wine, and it is from this showing that I take this note. The smoky nose is outstanding, offering up scents of black cherries, cigar ash, wild fennel, dark soil tones, cherry pit, a bit of tariness, woodsmoke and the typical botanicals of this wine. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and very elegant (particularly for a 2003!), with a fine core of fruit, moderate tannins, really good acids for the vintage and a long, balanced and stylish finish. Really a lovely bottle that is starting to drink with great charm at age eleven. 2014-2035. **92.**

#### **2002 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

The 2002 vintage in Abruzzo was a cooler vintage with a lot of rain in the spring. This year from Emidio and Sofia Pepe has produced a very nice bottle of Montepulciano, but by the very high standards of this family estate, this is a bit easy-going in personality and has aged in a fairly brisk manner. The nose is quite evolved and showing some tertiary elements in its mélange of dark berries, black cherries, herb tones, menthol, woodsmoke, a bit of gamebird, wild fennel and forest floor. On the palate the wine is medium-full, complex and quite wide open in personality, without the typical stuffing of this wine at the core, but still with fine complexity and just a bit of backend tannin remaining on the long and gently tarry finish. This is more of a middleweight vintage for the Pepe Montepulciano, and while this is not a great year here, the wine is still very good and drinking quite well today. 2014-2035. **89.**

#### **2001 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

The 2001 vintage is one of the recent favorites of *Signor* Pepe, and he is convinced that this will be a classic in the fullness of time. The bouquet is still quite primary in its blend of dark

berries, black cherries, Cuban cigars, a bit of cherry pits, dark soil, botanicals and a nice touch of nutskin in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite a powerful young vintage of the Pepe Montepulciano, with a rock solid core of fruit, lovely, nascent complexity, chewy tannins and excellent length and grip on the focused and still quite youthful finish. Today, the fine 2003 accessible, but with sufficient bottle age, the 2001 is going to be a reference point vintage of this great wine. 2020-2050+. **94+**.

#### **2000 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

I like the 2000 vintage quite well from the Pepe family, but this is probably not going to rate as one of the top vintages for this wine in the last dozen years. According to the Pepe family, this is a hot year, but not as torrid as 2003. The bouquet is starting to show some of the lovely secondary layers of complexity that emerge here with sufficient bottle age, as it offers up a complex mélange of black cherries, cigar ash, botanicals, a touch of red curry, a bit of meatiness and a gentle topnote of autumn leaves. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and a bit tarry in personality, with moderate tannins, sound acids and very good length and grip on the focused finish. This is not the most elegant vintage of Pepe Montepulciano that I have tasted, but it does show good complexity and balance and is going to continue to drink well for several more decades, so perhaps the elegance will arrive with further bottle age. 2014-2040. **90**.

#### **1998 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

The 1998 vintage has produced an absolutely classic style here, without perhaps the great stuffing of years like 2001, but a wine that will age long, gracefully and show great personality at its apogee. The very promising bouquet wafts from the glass in a blend of dark berries, black cherries, a bit of chicory, dark soil tones, classic Pepe botanicals, a bit of tariness and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and nascently complex, with beautiful balance and focus, moderate tannins and lovely length and grip on the long and tangy finish. This may end up a bit like the fine 1993 vintage here, but time will tell. 2020-2060. **92+**.

#### **1997 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

The 1997 vintage in Abruzzo was quite a bit warmer than the 1998, and the wine shows a bit more of a black fruity personality as a result. The bouquet is a complex blend of black cherries, espresso, tarry overtones, botanicals, cherry pits and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, long and complex, with a fine core of black fruit, ripe, but fairly gentle tannins and very fine length and grip on the still fairly primary finish. In terms of structure, the 1997 is quite approachable already, but it has not yet begun to develop its secondary layers of complexity and I would be inclined to still keep this promising wine tucked away in the cellar for a few more years. 2019-2035+. **92**.

#### **1995 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

The 1995 vintage of Emidio Pepe Montepulciano is quite red fruity in profile and has personality to burn, but it is still a bit on the young side structurally and will want a few more years in the cellar to really start hitting on all cylinders. This was a warmer year, like 1997, but it is more classically built and not as advanced today. The excellent bouquet jumps from the glass in a mélange of cherries, dried herbs, stony soil tones, mustard seed, a bit of bonfire and a topnote of chicory. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still quite chewy, with a lovely core of red fruit, tangy acids and excellent focus and grip on the long and moderately tannic finish. This is going to be special, but give it some more time in the cellar to blossom completely. 2022-2060+. **93+**.



#### **1994 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

I very much like the 1994 Montepulciano from Emidio Pepe, which hails from a vintage with a precocious spring, but a cooler *fin de saison* and which is very successful for the estate's Montepulciano. The wine offers up a very fine aromatic constellation of cherries, orange peel, botanicals, dark soil tones, red curry, a dollop of tariness and a bit of saddle leather in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and now nicely transparent, with a fine core, tangy acids, still a fair bit of firm tannins and a very long, focused and very well-balanced finish. This is approachable today, but I would be inclined to still give it another four or five years in the cellar for the tannins to more fully fade away. Really an outstanding wine from a more challenging vintage. 2019-2045+. **94.**

#### **1993 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

The 1993 vintage in Abruzzo was a drought year with plenty of heat, but the wine probably never started out life with the same kind of mid-palate stuffing of great classic years like 2001 or 2005. To my palate, the wine shows some cooler fruit tones in its refined and complex bouquet of red and black cherries, menthol, a gentle touch of tariness, classic Pepe botanicals, dark soil tones, cherry pit and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and very elegant, with excellent complexity, great focus and breed, fine intensity of flavor, tangy acids, melting tannin and outstanding length and grip on the vibrant and very classy finish. The Pepe family feels that this wine was never particularly tannic, but will continue to age very well indeed on its excellent acidity. Think of it as Emidio Pepe's version of a 1993 red Burgundy! 2014-2040+. **94.**

#### **1990 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

The 1990 Montepulciano from Emidio Pepe is not at its apogee of maturity and is drinking beautifully. This was a hot year in Abruzzo and the wine started out life with plenty of tannin, according to the Pepe family, but most of this has resolved nicely and the wine is really drinking with great breed and complexity. The superb nose soars from the glass in a mix of red and black cherries, a nice touch of meatiness, red curry, orange peel, a beautiful base of soil, wild fennel and plenty of woodsmoke in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and turning very transparent in profile, with a lovely core, melting tannins and outstanding length and grip on the perfectly focused finish. Fine, fine juice. 2014-2040. **94.**

#### **1985 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

The 1985 vintage from Emidio Pepe is really a stellar bottle of wine at its apogee of peak drinkability, soaring from the glass in a complex and truly beautiful bouquet of red berries, cherries, a nice touch of meatiness, orange peel, cigar ash, botanicals, woodsmoke, fresh oregano and a superb base of soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very transparent, with a lovely core, excellent focus and grip, still a touch of backend tannin and a very long, complex and tangy finish. A superb vintage for *Signor* Pepe, the 1985 is drinking with great style and refinement today! 2014-2035+. **95.**

#### **1983 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

The 1983 and 1985 vintages from Emidio Pepe make great bookends, as both wines are fully mature and drinking at their peaks today. The '85 is perhaps a touch more elegant, with the '83 a shade deeper at the core and a bit more structured for the long haul. The stunning nose of the 1983 offers up scents of red berries, forest floor, botanicals, lovely spice tones, a fine base of soil, an autumnal touch of acorn, dried herbs and a topnote of spices meats. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and complex, with a fine core, tangy acids, beautiful balance and

a very, very long, poised and classy finish that closes with excellent grip and bounce. Another absolutely classic vintage for the Pepe Montepulciano. 2014-2045. **95+**.



*Harvest time for the Trebbiano in Torano Nuova- foot-trodding is in their immediate future.*

### **1982 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

The 1982 vintage from the Pepe family has produced a superb wine that is now at its apogee of peak drinkability. The bouquet is a beautiful, red fruity blend of cherries, quince, orange peel, lovely spice tones, a very complex base of soil, a touch of road tar and a bit of Morey St. Denis-like mustard seed in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish, complex and quite transparent in personality, with lovely purity on the attack, melted tannins, lovely balance and fine length and grip on the poised, focused and tangy finish. Just a beautiful, *à point* vintage of Pepe Montepulciano for current consumption. 2014-2030. **93**.

### **1979 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

The 1979 vintage is another of Emidio Pepe's favorites from his long career, but the bottle that I had a chance to taste was not on form and showed a bit of horsiness that I associated with brett. Underneath is a fine blend of red and black cherries, cherry pits, classic botanicals, dark soil and saddle leather. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a slightly "flat" personality, melted tannins and good length and grip on the finish. I would not presume to know these wines better than *Signor* Pepe, so I just assume that I had a bit of back luck with the '79. 2014-2025. **87**.

### **1977 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

The 1977 Montepulciano from Emidio Pepe is absolutely stunning and at its peak of brilliance at age thirty-seven, soaring from the glass in a magical aromatic blend of red and black cherries, wild fennel, botanicals, a touch of discreet tariness, roasted *pigeon*, a dollop of menthol and a topnote of woodsmoke. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and exquisitely balanced, with a rock solid core, still a bit of remaining, buried tannin, great interplay of bitter and sweet and stunning length and grip on the resolved and still very vibrant finish. A great wine that is absolutely *à point* today. 2014-2040+. **94+**.

### **1975 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

According to the Pepe family, 1975 was quite a bit warmer of a vintage than 1977, but both vintages have produced absolute classics from the “Maestro of Montepulciano”. The brilliant bouquet delivers a marvelous mélange of dried red and black cherries, a touch of menthol, espresso, almond, botanicals, dark soil tones, a bit of cigar smoke and a nice touch of spiced meats in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very soil-driven in personality, with an excellent core, perfect balance and a very, very long, tangy and complex finish. There is still just a touch of backend tannin here that shows that this wine has decades of life still ahead of it. Bravo! 2014-2050. **96**.

### **1970 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

The 1970 vintage from Emidio Pepe is outstanding, as he recalls that the summer months here were quite hot, but the autumn cooler and the fruit came into the winery in absolutely perfect condition. Forty-four years on the wine is absolutely singing, wafting from the glass in a brilliant blend of black cherries, wild fennel, dark soil tones, botanicals, red curry, woodsmoke and a touch of clove. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, very complex and still at its peak, with lovely mid-palate depth, superb transparency, just a touch of melted tannin and a very, very long, refined and vibrant finish. Great juice. 2014-2035. **95+**.

### **1964 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo- Emidio Pepe**

Emidio Pepe's very first vintage is absolutely stellar and continues to drink beautifully at age fifty! We had this wine at both events, and the first evening's bottle was absolutely pristine, and this note is taken from that bottle (rather than the slightly more autumnal bottle served the following day). The wine offers up a simply gorgeous nose of desiccated red and black cherries, hung game, very refined botanicals, red curry, wild fennel, a touch of orange peel and a lovely mix of spices tones in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, long and still nicely tangy, with melted tannins, outstanding focus and complexity, lovely poise and elegance and a very long, beautifully balanced finish. A great wine. 2014-2030+. **94**.

**GILLMAN VINEYARD**  
**ONE OF NEW ZEALAND'S TINY GEMS OF A WINERY**



*Toby Gillman (3<sup>rd</sup> from right) with his wife Peggy and parents, John and Rebecca in the vineyard.*

Gillman Vineyard is located in the Matakana region, on the northern end of the north island of New Zealand, about an hour's drive north of Auckland. I have very much liked the estate's wines since the very first sample crossed my path several years ago (and not only because it is such a well-named property!), as the wines have been consistently deep, complex, well-balanced and serious candidates for the cellar. Matakana is not far inland from the Pacific Ocean to the east, and bordered just to the west by the Rodney Ranges (that climb to 1200 feet above sea level), creating a relatively dry and warm microclimate that has allowed red wine varieties to prosper. Gillman Vineyard produces solely a Bordeaux-inspired red wine blend (most of the time), and it is one of the hidden gems in the world of wine. The estate is very small, only producing one hundred and twenty-five to two hundred cases each year, but this micro-estate is making one of the classiest Bordeaux-inspired blends in the New World. Their flagship wine (and only bottling in most vintages) is a St. Émilien-inspired blend of two-thirds cabernet franc, thirty percent merlot and five percent malbec. The man behind these beautiful wines is Toby Gillman, who fell in love with wine during his university days and began his career working part-time in the mid-1990s at Matakana's Providence Vineyard, volunteering on evenings and weekends in exchange for plenty of hands on experience and some fine old bottles over dinner from the resident winemaker's personal cellar of French wines. His father John Gillman was also happy to lend a hand at Providence Vineyard during this time, having also been bitten by the wine bug and sharing his son's enthusiasm for winemaking and many a fine old bottle of claret, and he is a steady contributor at the family winery to this day. This *stage* for

Toby at Providence was followed by a year working in Bordeaux at Château Angélus in St. Émilion in 1997. Returning to New Zealand in 1998, Toby and his father John began to lay out plans for Gillman Vineyard and they found and planted a site in the spring of '98. This 1.5 acre vineyard is a steep hillside, facing north, which they planted to two-thirds cabernet franc, nearly a third merlot and a small amount of malbec. The rows were laid out Bordeaux style, with low trellising and dense plantation. The soils here are an iron-infused mixture of volcanic clay, in which the vines have thrived since day one and produce a wine of great distinction and breed.

Toby Gillman, beyond his apprenticeships at Providence Vineyard and Château Angélus, has had no formal winemaking training, as his college degree is in accounting, rather than oenology, and accounting remains his “day job”. As he recalls, “there was a brief period, while I was at University, when I thought maybe I should do a wine-making degree and become a winemaker,” but “then I realized that I would be stuck making bloody grassy sauvignon blanc for someone else, and never have the income to plant my own place.” He continues that “the accounting, while tedious, does fund the pretty onerous capital requirements” necessary for running a small winery. He notes that during his time at Angélus, “everyone was studying from (Emile) Peynaud’s textbook, so when I got back home I managed to track down an English translation and just worked through it” on my own and this is the basis of his winemaking techniques. In any case, as he comments, “I’m more drawn to the low-tech, more traditional techniques anyway (nothing in Peynaud is all that radical by today’s standards)” and with a couple of good, formally-trained winemaking friends close by to handle any complex technical or chemistry questions that may arise, Toby feels he is well-served to rely on Professor Peynaud’s methodology in the cellar. Certainly, based on the superb wines that I have tasted from the family vineyard in Matakana, everything is working just fine in the cellars right now.

Consequently, cellar techniques here are very typical of Bordeaux, once the vines have been picked, which occurs in April in Matakana. The grapes are hand sorted and a strict selection made to remove any unevenly ripe bunches, and then the wine is pressed by a basket press and fermented in open top wood vats, with regular punch-downs and a maceration that typically last three weeks. The juice is then racked off into fifty percent new Seguin Moreau barrels (no Taransaud barrels here!) for its malolactic fermentation and aged in barrel for two years prior to bottling. The wine will be racked four or five times during the course of its two years of *elevage*, depending on the style of the vintage, as Toby seeks to retain good structure for aging in his wines and feels that a greater number of rackings would make the wines too soft. As readers already know, I am not a huge fan of Bordeaux-styled wines having their malolactic fermentation take place in barrel, but at Gillman Vineyard, the technique clearly works and produces wines of beautifully integrated oak. Perhaps one of the key differences in the approach in the cellars here and in the large number of properties on the Gironde that practice malolactic in barrel, is that Toby never hurries the malolactic fermentation here (whereas in Bordeaux, it is pushed through very quickly to get the wines ready for *En Primeur*), as he “let’s the malo happen naturally- never racking the wines for the first nine months or so- and the malolactic can often take up to a year to finish,” and this may be why the oak integrates so beautifully into the overall balance of the wines here. This lovely oak integration is one of the hallmarks for the Gillman Vineyard Matakana bottling, for though the new wood here is present, it is always done in a very understated and supporting style that really allows the beautiful fruit and the lovely soil tones to stand front and center in the wine. I asked Toby about this and he related that he is convinced

that the Seguin Moreau barrels also play a very big role in the understated expression of oak in his wines: “when I was at Providence, we started off using mainly Seguin Moreau barrels, but also regularly tried other brands- I am not sure what they are doing differently, but I have always found the wine from the Seguin Moreau barrels to be more elegant than even other well-regarded barrel makers - as you say, with less overtly woody flavors.”

However, one of the differences in the Gillman Vineyard cellars from several other producers around the globe working with Bordeaux varietals, is that Toby Gillman now uses Burgundy barrels, rather than Bordeaux barrels, for the *elevage* of his wines. As he relates, it was mostly by happenstance that he made the switch, as the former distributor of Seguin Moreau barrels in New Zealand was not always the most precise in his deliveries, and back in 2006, the delivery of barrels arrived at Gillman Vineyard as Burgundy barrels, rather than the Bordeaux barrels which had been ordered. Toby relates that “I exchanged them for the correct barrels, but kept a couple of the Burgundy barrels just to see how they would go.” He was quite impressed with the results and has subsequently switched entirely to Burgundy barrels, as he has observed that “with the thicker barrel staves, less oxygen gets into the wine, and seemingly less oak-flavored extract” and “the wine develops more slowly in the barrel, retaining more freshness I think, without being overwhelmed by the oak.” Of course, the percentage of new wood has also been dialed back here since the first vintage in 2002, as the Gillman Vineyard wines were originally raised in one hundred percent new wood, but now are treated to only fifty percent.

Though the vines here are only sixteen years of age. Toby does a very fine job of keeping the vigor of the vines reined in and the producing wines of great balance and complexity. Matakana is not the warmest of regions, but much depends on where a specific vineyard is planted, as some sites are decidedly cooler and also are placed with poorer drainage and can really have problems in wetter years. The Gillman vineyard is planted on a steep hillside that is one of the best microclimates in Matakana. Toby notes that their average ripeness levels in their vineyard tend to be a bit higher than many of their neighbors, and depending on their year, the wines can range from thirteen to fourteen and a half percent alcohol, and he has not chapitalized the wine since the first few vintages. He notes that fermenting in wooden vats, with several punch-downs may also assist here, “I think, due the open top vats and frequent plunging during fermentation- the must gets more oxygen and ferments out more thoroughly.” With its high percentage of cabernet franc in the blend and the obvious inspiration of St. Émilien here, I asked Toby if he had a fondness for the wines of St. Émilien before his *stage* at Château Angélus and he responded that for “anyone growing Cabernet Franc- which was becoming my favorite variety- Pomerol and especially St. Émilien” were inspirations. He continued, “Matakana is much more analogous to the Right Bank, it's all clay soils, no gravel, and not quite hot enough to reliably ripen Cabernet Sauvignon.” As he recalls, “being a Franc fan, I idolized Cheval Blanc and Hubert du Bouard was kind enough to arrange a meeting for me with Pierre Lurton” during his year in Bordeaux.

His wine certainly does bear a bit of a resemblance to Cheval Blanc, with a silky texture coupled with excellent youthful balance that buries fine structure behind a suave veneer. Of the seven vintages that I have had the pleasure to taste, stretching back to the 2003, the wine offers up a lovely synthesis of youthful accessibility and refined structure that shows every likelihood of aging along the lines of front-line Bordeaux, and it does not seem far-fetched at all to assume



that the Gillman Vineyard red will age thirty or forty years in the cellar. Of course, it is still too early in the winery's history to know this for certain, but the wines do start out life with the keystone of vinous longevity and that is impeccable balance, and it seems quite clear that Toby Gillman is aiming to make a classic wine to evolve and improve with bottle age. Happily, there is no *En Primeur* in Matakana to primp the wine for early appeal, and one gets the sense that if there were, Toby would eschew shaping the wine to show well at early tastings in any case. This is a very, very exciting and little known wine outside of New Zealand, but very much worth the effort to track down a handful of bottles if one is looking for a cellar replacement for the now dearly departed Magdelaine or Figeac. Outside of New Zealand and Australia, the wines do not yet have wide distribution (though Toby did note that he was packing a shipment for Hong Kong as my litany of questions arrived in his inbox), but the winery does offer world-wide shipping for direct orders, as they have a shipping company that handles this in a most cost-effective manner. Inquiries can be sent through the winery's website. These are terrific wines that strongly deserve to be less of a well-kept secret!

As I alluded to above, until quite recently, the St. Émilion-inspired red was the only wine being produced at Gillman Vineyard, but starting in the 2009 vintage, Toby began to also produce a bottling of Clairet Rosé, that echoes similar wines that used to be produced once upon a time in Bordeaux. It is a fairly dark-colored rosé that really tastes and behaves more as a light red wine, which is exactly the style that Toby is shooting for with this bottling. As he recalls, "There was still the odd Grand Cru Classé producing claret in the '80s, which I would have been drinking during the '90s, from memory Léoville-Barton was one" and "the grapes that they used for the claret back in the day presumably now go towards their second labels." He did not think too much about the wines in the early days of his own family winery, but as he settled in with the vineyard and cellars he began to recall fondly those Gironde-based claret bottlings from yesteryear. "By the time 2009 rolled around," Toby remembers, "I hadn't seen a claret for the longest time, so I figured I would make my own" and he did so in the 2009 vintage, and then again in 2011, 2012 and 2013 (there was no claret produced at the estate in the 2010 vintage, as the crop was too short and all of the grapes were needed for the red wine.) He only produces a single barrel of the claret rosé in any given year, and he notes that probably one-third of the production each year is drunk up by the extended family. As he notes, "I see our claret more as a light red that is suitable for chilling and drinking on a warm day," as "essentially I am using the same grapes as for our red." The wine is quite dark in color for a rosé, and as the note below on the inaugural vintage of 2009 will show, it really is a lighter-styled red wine that takes chilling very, very well and was perfect accompanying steaks on the grill on a sultry summer evening. The wine is only available at the winery (though perhaps one could persuade Toby to ship a few bottles along with an order of his red wines), and really is another very well-made wine from Gillman Vineyard.



*The vineyard in the autumn- note how steep the hillside is in which the vines thrive.*

### **2009 Gillman Vineyard “Clairet” Rosé Matakana**

The 2009 Gillman Vineyard Clairet Rosé is comprised of a blend of cabernet franc and merlot and is quite dark cherry red in color and offers up a lovely nose that is really more serious red wine in aromatics than rosé, offering up a fine mélange of black cherries, cassis, lovely soil tones, violets and a touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely complex, with still bright acids, good focus and grip, just a whisper of tannin and excellent length and grip on the finish. I drank this fine bottle with steaks on the grill in mid-summer, on a warm evening and it worked beautifully. 2014-2018+? **89.**

### **2009 Gillman Vineyard Matakana**

The 2009 Matakana from Gillman Vineyard comes in at an even fourteen percent and shows off lovely complexity on both the nose and palate. The deep, ripe and pure bouquet offers up scents of black cherries, sweet dark berries, espresso, cigar wrapper, lovely soil tones and a very discreet base of nutty oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and beautifully structured, with a sappy core of fruit, ripe, well-integrated tannins, good acids and a very long, complex and still fairly youthful finish. This is going to be a dynamite bottle of wine, but I would be inclined to still give this very promising bottle at least another five or six years in the cellar to fully blossom. Excellent juice. 2019-2040+. **93+.**

### **2008 Gillman Vineyard Matakana**

The 2008 vintage from Toby Gillman is one of the riper vintages I have tasted of this cuvée, coming in at an uncapitalized 14.5 percent alcohol, but the wine shows no signs of *sur maturité* or uncovered alcohol on either the nose or palate. The bouquet is a ripe and seductive blend of black cherries, a bit of pomegranate, cocoa powder, a nice touch of soil tones, a bit of menthol and a nice framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is plush, full-bodied and quite velvety on the attack, with a fine core of fruit, moderate tannins and a long, complex and chewy



finish. The slightly riper style here has given the wine just a touch more oak tannin on the backend- though completely integrated into the base of the wine- and despite the wine's quite plush personality today, I would be inclined to give it at least a few more years in the cellar to allow its backend tannins to melt away a bit more. Good juice, but I get even more excited about the vintages here that are a touch lower in octane. 2018-2040. **91+**.

**2007 Gillman Vineyard Matakana**

The 2007 bottling from the Matakana vineyard is outstanding, and at age seven it is starting to blossom on the nose and begin to really come into its own aromatically, but it is still a bit buttoned up behind its structure on the palate and wants a bit more bottle age. The fine nose wafts from the glass in a mix of cassis, dark berries, sweet cigar smoke, dark soil tones, a bit of chicory, fresh herbs and a bit of new wood. On the palate the wine is focused, full-bodied and really very promising, with a superb core of fruit, tangy acids, a fair bit of chewy tannin still to resolve and excellent length and grip on the well-balanced and classy finish. Give this a bit more time. 2020-2040+. **92.**

**2006 Gillman Vineyard Matakana**

The 2006 Matakana from Toby Gillman is a beautiful wine, coming in at 13.5 percent alcohol and offering up a deep and very classy aromatic constellation of dark berries, black cherries, a touch of tobacco leaf, lovely soil tones, a touch of new wood and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very pure on the attack, with a lovely core of fruit, blossoming complexity, ripe, fine-grained tannins and excellent length and grip on the very refined finish. Beautiful juice. 2014-2035. **92+**.

**2005 Gillman Vineyard Matakana (375 ml.)**

The 2005 Matakana offers up a superbly complex nose of cherries, menthol, tobacco, coffee, lovely soil tones and a discreet framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, suave and classy, with lovely, nascent complexity, moderate tannins and fine length and grip on the elegant finish. Drinkable today, the 2005 should develop additional layers of complexity with a few more years of bottle age, and I might be inclined to tuck this bottle away until 2012 or so. Classy juice and a new name to look for in the firmament of top quality New Zealand wine. 2015-2035. **91+**.



**2004 Gillman Vineyard Matakana (375 ml.)**

The 2004 Matakana from Gillman Vineyard is a superb wine, with a bit more underlying structure in evidence than the 2005. The bouquet is a tad “cooler” in profile than the 2005, allowing for an even greater interplay of fruit and the volcanic soils on which this vineyard is planted, as it offers up a complex mélange of bell pepper, cherries, tobacco, a fine base of soil, cigar smoke and a topnote of fresh herbs. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely reserved, with a rock solid core of fruit, ripe tannins, and excellent focus and grip on the long, intensely flavored and utterly refined finish. This is a terrific wine that simply needs a couple more years of cellaring to really blossom. 2014-2030. **92.**

**2003 Gillman Vineyard Matakana (375 ml.)**

The 2003 Gillman Matakana is another outstanding bottle from this young and upcoming estate. The bouquet is deep and classy, showing off its cabernet franc heritage in a complex blend of dark berries, tobacco leaf, cigar smoke, a fine base of soil, a touch of bell pepper and just a hint of game in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, deep and tangy, with lovely complexity, excellent mid-palate depth and just a bit of tannin to resolve on the very long, focused and classy finish. This wine would be hard to pick out in a blind tasting of classed growth St. Émilions, and is really a bit more true to the heritage of the Right Bank than many of the modern wines of the commune that taste as if they could have just as well been made in Chile or California. The 2003 Gillman Vineyard Matakana is drinking well today, but a few more years of bottle age will allow its secondary levels of complexity to fully come to the fore. Classy juice. 2012-2025. **90.**



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## **Alphabetical Listing of Producers and Their Wines Covered in This Feature:**

### ***Wines Tasted at Domaines Visited During My Week in the Region***

#### **Pol Roger (Épernay)**

*“Pure” Extra Brut NV; 2004 Brut Millésime; 2002 Blanc de Blanc Brut Millésime; 2000 “Cuvée Winston Churchill”; 2006 Brut Rosé; 1990 Blanc de Blanc Brut Millésime.*

#### **Champagne Gosset (Épernay)**

*Brut Excellence NV; Grande Blanc de Blancs Brut NV; Grande Réserve Brut NV; Grande Réserve Brut NV (Cellared since August 2011); 2004 Grande Millésime Brut; Grande Rosé Brut NV; 2002 Cuvée Celebris Extra Brut; 2007 Cuvée Celebris Rosé Extra Brut.*

#### **Champagne Henriot (Reims)**

*“Brut Souverain” NV; “Blanc Souverain” Brut NV; Brut Rosé NV; 2005 Brut Millésime; 2006 Brut Millésime; 2008 Brut Millésime Rosé; 2005 Brut Millésime Rosé; 1999 Cuvée Enchanteurs Brut (served from magnum); 1998 Cuvée Enchanteurs Brut.*

#### **Krug (Reims)**

*Grande Cuvée Brut (Base Year 2006); Grande Cuvée Brut (Base Year 2005); Grande Cuvée Brut (Base Year 2005- Different Disgorgement Date); Grande Cuvée Brut “Memoire” (Base Year 2003); 2003 Vintage Brut; 2000 Vintage Brut; Brut Rosé.*

#### **Taittinger (Reims)**

*“Brut Réserve” Brut NV; “la Française” Brut NV; “Prestige Rosé” Brut NV; “Nocturne” Sec NV; “Nocturne” Rosé Sec NV; Prélude Grand Cru Brut NV; 2006 Brut Millésimé; Folies de la Marquetterie Brut NV; 2005 Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs Brut; 2002 Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs Brut ; 1990 Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs Brut; 2002 Comtes de Champagne Brut Rosé; 2000 Comtes de Champagne Brut Rosé.*

#### **Bruno Paillard (Reims)**

*“Réserve Privé” Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Brut NV; “Première Cuvée” Brut NV (Disgorged October 2013); “Première Cuvée” Brut NV (Disgorged May 2007); “Première Cuvée” Brut NV (Disgorged February 2001); “Première Cuvée” Brut Rosé NV (Disgorged June 2013); 2004 “Assemblage” Brut Millésime; 1996 “Blanc de Blancs” Brut Millésime (Disgorged July 2007); 1999 “N.P.U” Brut.*

**Billecart-Salmon (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ)**

*Extra Brut NV; Brut Réserve NV; Brut Réserve NV (2008 Release); Brut Rosé NV (Disgorged September 2013); 2006 Vintage Extra Brut; 1999 “Cuvée Nicolas François Billecart” Brut; 1996 Vintage Blanc de Blancs Brut; 2002 “Cuvée Elisabeth Salmon” Brut Rosé.*

**Philipponnat (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ)**

*Brut Royale Réserve NV; “Non-Dosé” Royale Réserve NV (Disgorged February 2013); “Non-Dosé” Royale Réserve NV (Disgorged February 2012); Réserve Rosée NV (Disgorged September 2013); 2006 Grande Blanc Brut; 2005 Grande Blanc Brut; 1982 Grande Blanc Brut; 2003 Réserve Millésime Brut; 2004 “Cuvée 1522” Grand Cru Brut; 2006 “Cuvée 1522” Grand Cru Brut Rosé; 2006 “Mareuil Pinot Noir Lot 12/204” Brut; 2004 Clos des Goisses Brut; 2000 Clos des Goisses Brut.*

**Champagne Charles Heidsieck (Reims)**

*Brut Réserve NV; Brut Réserve NV (2012 Release- old label); Rosé Réserve Brut NV; 2000 Brut Millésime; 1995 “Blanc des Millénaires” Brut Millésime; 1985 “Champagne Charlie” Brut Millésime; 1999 Rosé Brut Millésime.*

**Louis Roederer (Reims)**

*Brut Premier NV (Disgorged October 2012); 2007 Brut Millésime; 2008 Brut Rosé; 2006 Cristal Brut; 2005 Cristal Brut.*

**Jacques Selosse (Avize)**

*Cuvée Substance Brut NV (Disgorged October 2013); Sous Le Mont Brut NV (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ)- (Disgorged 2/13); Le Chemin de Châlons Brut NV (Cramant)- (Disgorged 2012); Sous Le Mont Brut NV (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ)- (Disgorged 2009); Sous Le Mont Brut NV (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ)- (Disgorged 2008); Sous Le Mont Brut NV (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ)- (Disgorged 2005); Avize Oloroso (Still Wine).*

**Champagne Georges Laval (Cumières)**

*Georges Laval “Cumières” Brut Nature NV (Base Year 2008); Georges Laval “Cumières” Brut Nature NV Magnum (Base Years 2011, 2010 and 2009); “Les Chênes” Blanc de Blancs (Base Year 2008) Brut Nature; “Les Hautes Chèvres” (Base Year 2004) Brut Nature; “Cumières” Brut Nature Rosé NV.*

**Bérêche Père et Fils (Ludes)**

*Brut NV (Disgorged October 2013); “Reffet d’Antan” Brut NV (Disgorged January 2011); “Les Beaux Regards” Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut NV; Raphaël and Vincent Bérêche “Côte- 62 Mois en Cave” Extra Brut (Disg: October 2013); Raphaël and Vincent Bérêche “Côte- Millésime 2002” Brut; 2005 “Vieilles Vignes Sélectionnées” Brut Millésime; 2002 Raphaël and Vincent Bérêche “Vallée de la Marne” Brut Millésime.*

**Bernard Brémont (Ambonnay)**

*Brut NV (Disgorged January 2014); “Cuvée Prestige” Brut NV (Disgorged January 2014); 2006 Brut Millésime; 2004 Brut Millésime; Brut Rosé NV.*

## **Alphabetical Listing of Producers (Not Visited) and Their Wines Covered in This Feature:**

**Roger Adnot** 1985 Blanc de Blancs Premier Cru Extra Brut;  
**L. Aubry et Fils** “Premier Cru” Brut NV; “Dualis” Premier Cru Brut NV; 2009 Le Nombre d’Or Brut Millésime; 2009 Ivoire & Ébène Brut Millésime;  
**Ayala** Brut Nature NV; “Brut Majeur” NV; “Rosé Majeur” Brut NV; 2007 Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime; 2005 “Cuvée Perle d’Ayala” Brut Millésime;  
**Bellavista** “Cuvée Franciacorta” Brut NV (Italy);  
**H. Billiot Fils** “Brut Réserve” Grand Cru NV;  
**Bollinger** “Special Cuvée” Brut NV (served from double magnum); Brut Rosé NV; 2004 “Grande Année” Brut Millésime; 2002 R.D. Brut; 1990 R.D. Brut;  
**Franck Bonville** Blanc de Blancs Brut NV Grand Cru;  
**Cédric Bouchard** 2005 “Inflorescence la Parcelle” Blanc de Noirs Brut;  
**Emmanuel Brochet** “Le Mont Benoit” Extra Brut NV;  
**Pierre Callot** 2007 “les Avats” Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Brut;  
**Domaine Carneros:** “Cuvée de la Pompadour” Brut Rosé NV; 2010 Vintage Brut; “le Rêve” Blanc de Blancs Vintage Brut;  
**Chartogne-Taillet** “les Barres” Extra Brut NV; “Cuvée Sainte Anne” Brut NV; Brut Rosé NV; 2008 Brut Millésime;  
**Gaston Chiquet** “Blanc de Blancs d’Aÿ” Brut Grand Cru NV; Brut “Tradition” Premier Cru;  
**Paul Clouet** Grand Cru Brut NV; “Cuvée Prestige” Grand Cru Brut NV; Brut Rosé Grand Cru NV;  
**Champagne Corbon** “Absolument Brut” Brut Nature NV; 2004 Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Brut Millésime; 2004 Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Brut Millésime “Battoné”;  
**Roger Coulon** “Réserve de l’Homme” Blanc de Noirs Brut NV;  
**R. H. Coutier** Grand Cru “Tradition Brut” NV; “Cuvée Rosé” Brut Grand Cru;  
**Baron Dauvergne** “Oiel de Perdrix” Grand Cru Brut NV; “Cuvée Prestige” Grand Cru Brut NV;  
**Delamotte** 2004 Blanc de Blancs Brut;  
**Demièrre-Ansiot** Blanc de Blancs “Grand Cru” Brut NV;  
**Champagne Deutz** 2007 Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime; 2005 Amour de Deutz Brut Millésime;  
**Champagne José Dhondt** Blanc de Blancs “Grand Cru” Brut NV;  
**Joël Falmet** Brut Tradition NV;  
**Nathalie Falmet** Brut Nature NV; “Cuvée Le Val Cornet” Brut NV;  
**Gatinois** “Brut Tradition” Grand Cru NV; Brut Rosé Grand Cru;  
**Jean-François Geoffroy** “Blanc de Rosé” Extra Brut;  
**René Geoffroy** “Expression” Brut Premier Cru NV;  
**Pierre Gerbais** “Prestige” Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut NV; “Cuvée de Réserve” Brut NV;  
**Pierre Gimonnet** Blanc de Blancs “Cuvée Cuis Premier Cru” Brut NV; Blanc de Blancs “Sélection Belles Années” Premier Cru Brut NV; 2008 “Cuvée Gastronom” 1er Cru Blanc de Blancs Brut; 2005 Spécial Club Grands Terroirs de Chardonnay Brut;  
**Henri Goutorbe** “Cuvée Prestige” Premier Cru Brut NV; 2004 Spécial Club Brut Grand Cru;  
**Marc Hébrart** Blanc de Blancs Brut NV Premier Cru; “Sélection” Brut NV Premier Cru; 2009 Spécial Club Brut Premier Cru;  
**Benoît Lahaye** “Brut Essential” NV (served from magnum);

**Laherte Frères** “Les Empreintes” Extra Brut NV; “Les 7” Extra Brut NV; “Ultra Tradition” Brut NV; “Ultra Tradition” Brut Rosé NV; “les Beaudiers” Rosé Saignée “Vieilles Vignes” Extra Brut NV; 2005 Brut Millésime;  
**Jean Lallement et Fils** “Cuvée Réserve” Grand Cru Brut NV; “Réserve Rosée” Brut NV;  
**Laurent-Perrier** Brut NV;  
**Marie-Noëlle Ledru** Brut NV Grand Cru;  
**Gérard Lorient** Brut NV;  
**A. Margaine** “le Brut” Premier Cru NV; Brut Rosé Premier Cru NV;  
**Marguet Père et Fils** “Brut Réserve” Grand Cru NV; Brut Rosé Grand Cru NV; 2008 Grand Cru Extra Brut Millésime; 2008 “les Crayères” Grand Cru Brut; 2006 Grand Cru Brut Millésime; 2006 “Sapience” Premier Cru Extra Brut; 2009 Brut Rosé Grand Cru;  
**Marie-Courtin** “Résonance” Extra Brut NV; “Concordance” Extra Brut NV;  
**Paul Louis Martin** Blanc de Blancs Brut NV;  
**Christophe Mignon** Brut Nature NV; “Pur Meunier” Brut Rosé NV;  
**Jean Milan** “Spécial” Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Brut NV; “Grande Réserve” Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Brut NV;  
**Marcel Moineaux** 2004 Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime Grand Cru;  
**Pierre Moncuit** Blanc de Blancs “Cuvée Hugues de Coulmet” Brut NV; Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Brut NV;  
**Moussé Fils** “Noire Réserve” Blanc de Noirs Brut NV; 2008 Brut Millésime;  
**Moutard Père et Fils** “Grande Cuvée” Brut NV; “Rosé de Cuvaision” NV;  
**Mouzon-Leroux** “l’Ineffable” Blanc de Noirs Extra Brut NV; “l’Atavique” “Brut Réserve” NV;  
**Nyetimber** “Classic Cuvée” Brut NV (England);  
**Pierre Paillard** Grand Cru Brut NV; 2004 Brut Millésime Grand Cru;  
**Hubert Paulet** “Cuvée Tradition” Brut NV Premier Cru; 2002 “Cuvée Risléus” Brut Millésime Premier Cru; 2005 Brut Rosé Millésime Premier Cru;  
**Champagne Pehu-Simonet** Blanc de Blancs Brut NV Grand Cru; “Sélection” Brut NV Grand Cru;  
**Pierre Peters** “Cuvée de Réserve” Blanc de Blancs Brut NV;  
**Piper-Heidsieck** Brut NV; “Rosé Sauvage” Brut NV; 2002 “Rare” Brut;  
**Ployez-Jacquemart** “Extra Quality” Brut NV; “Extra Quality” Brut NV (2008 Release); Extra Brut Rosé NV; 2005 “Blanc de Blancs” Extra Brut Vintage; 2005 Extra Brut Vintage; 1999 Liesse d’Harbonville Brut Millésime;  
**Dom Riunart** 2002 Blanc de Blancs Brut; 1998 Blanc de Blancs Brut;  
**Roederer Estate:** Brut NV; Brut Rosé NV; 2005 “l’Hermitage” Vintage Brut; 2004 “l’Hermitage” Vintage Brut Rosé;  
**Barons de Rothschild** Blanc de Blancs Brut NV; Brut NV; Brut Rosé NV;  
**Camille Savès** Carte Blanche Premier Cru Brut NV (served from magnum); Brut Rosé NV (2010 Release);  
**Suenen** Blanc de Blancs “Grand Cru” Extra Brut;  
**Fernand Thill** “Brut Tradition” Grand Cru NV;  
**Varnier-Fanniere** Grand Cru Brut NV;  
**Vazart-Coquart et Fils** Blanc de Blancs “Grand Cru” Brut NV;  
**Vilmart Cie** “Cuvée Rubis” Brut Rosé Premier Cru NV; 2009 “Grand Cellier d’Or” Brut Premier Cru; 2005 “Coeur de Cuvée” Premier Cru Brut;  
**Marie Weiss** Brut NV.



**THE ANNUAL CHAMPAGNE AND SPARKLING WINE REPORT:  
AUGMENTED THIS YEAR BY A WEEK ON THE GROUND IN CHAMPAGNE**



*The delightful Caf  du Palais in the heart of Reims.*

Back when I took the poll at the end of 2013 about continuing coverage of *En Primeur* in Bordeaux or expanding coverage of a different region with the same travel allotment in the spring, a great many of subscribers lobbied for my putting in more time on the ground in Champagne. Consequently, I happily traded in a week of grinding through very, very young claret on the Gironde this year for a week in Champagne, and finally had the time to get around to visiting a number of houses whose wines I have enjoyed for many, many years, but where I have never had the opportunity to visit and taste *sur place*. I put together my itinerary for this week in Champagne (sandwiched between weeks in Germany and Burgundy) with a mix of stops at *Grandes Marques* and Grower-R coltants, and I could have very easily spent a month here in the region and still not gotten around to visiting everyone who deserved a slot on my tasting schedule. Not surprisingly, as for many of these producers it was my first visit to the house, my visits were a bit of a mixed bag in terms of success, as Champagne is still a region that sees lots of tourists and it is very easy to fall into the scripted, guided tour and not really spend any meaningful time in dialogue or detailed tasting, and I did have a few of these visits during my



week. Happily, these were the exception, rather than the norm, and I did primarily spend my time very fruitfully in cellars and tasting rooms at most of the domaines that were on my schedule.

I started out my week camped out in Reims, but this did not turn out very well, as I was hit by a brutal bout of food poisoning from bad oysters during the first meal in Reims (I heartily recommend avoiding the restaurant at the Hotel de la Paix and the hotel's far from *sympathique* management - I sure as hell will not be back there any time soon!) which really took three days to fully recover from, so what should have been the immense pleasure of long days of tasting in Champagne really turned into a far more arduous ordeal than I anticipated. Somehow I managed to soldier through the first couple of days of tastings, but am very much looking forward to a "redo" on my next visit in Reims, as I was too sick most evenings to get out and sample the cuisine in the city and was pretty content when my switch of base of operations moved to Avize and coincided with my finally recovering from the bad oysters. On my way out of town on Thursday I did get a chance to dine at Le Jardin, the fantastic bistro of Les Crayères, where the food was exceptional and the Champagne list even better, so the whole culinary portion of my stay in Reims was not completely wiped out by those nasty oysters. But, I did not really get the wind back in my sails until that evening, where I had the pleasure of dining at Anselme Selosse's superb restaurant, Les Avisés (located in the family's hotel of the same name), and I cannot say enough good things about the stellar cuisine of chef Stéphane Rossillon and the exceptional service of his wife Nathalie who runs the front of the house of this intimate and outstanding restaurant. The menu was so stunning on Thursday evening that I booked a table again on Friday night and was back in my same seat precisely twenty-four hours after the outset of the first display of culinary fireworks for another immensely satisfying meal. This restaurant will have its Michelin stars in the fullness of time and it seems to me that it is already really one of the dining destinations in the region. The wine list is so good from regions like the Loire Valley and the Rhône Valley (all of the great traditionalists one would look for, such as Pierre Gonon) that it was hard to stay focused on Champagne (which is also a stellar lineup of "Who's Who" in both the top *Grandes Marques* and the smaller *vignerons* offerings) and I ended up my first night drinking a Clos Rougeard with my main course, rather than the bubbly I was there to handicap, as I simply could not stay focused! I would not even have had a glass of Monsieur Selosse's great wine until the following morning's tasting in the cellars, but for the generosity of fellow New Yorkers, Ralph Bonavist and Kathy Fitzgerald, who were sitting at the table next to me and generously sent over a glass of his wine to accompany the cheese course!

Once I had a chance to put that bout with bad oysters fully in the rearview mirror, my trip improved immeasurably, and I had a wonderful end of the week bouncing back and forth between superb *Grandes Marques* and some of my very favorite growers in the region. As this was my first of what I intend to be regular, extended stays in the region, I spent most of my time in the cellars and tasting rooms and did not get to visit as many vineyards as I would normally have liked to have done, but I did get to spend an hour out in the vines in the village of Cumières with Vincent Laval of Champagne Georges Laval, and it was a very interesting slice of the afternoon. As good as Champagne is today (and I firmly believe we are living through one of the golden ages for this region at the present time), there is no doubt that Champagne that still has one more quantum leap to make in terms of improving quality of its wines, and that would be to see the region's general level of viticulture catch up with the likes of regions such as Burgundy. There have been some huge improvements in the last several years, led first and foremost in the

realm of the *Grandes Marques* by Maison Louis Roederer, who is in the process of converting all of their two hundred and thirty hectares of vineyards over to *biodynamique* viticulture. This is a huge change, as industrially-styled viticulture is still the norm in huge swaths of the Champagne *vignobles*, which would make anyone but a petro-chemical salesman weep to walk through some of these vineyards, but the inertia that is being set in motion by Louis Roederer's commitment to *biodynamism* and far more organically sustainable grape-growing should serve as a catalyst to get a lot more growers and houses to change their methodology in the vines in the near future.

Walking around the vineyards in Cumières with Vincent Laval, it was very striking to see the stark contrasts between the healthy and thriving soils in his vineyards (as well as several of the nearby parcels owned by Louis Roederer in the village, which are also in prime condition), set alongside some of the most barren, lunar landscapes of springtime vineyard land that I have ever seen. Looking, side by side, at the two camps of viticulture in Champagne today, it is abundantly clear that it is high time for everyone who grows grapes in Champagne to start to take their vineyard husbandry a bit more seriously and start to respect their guardianship of the vines here by adopting more sustainable methods. As we walked along through the vineyards, Vincent was very quick to point out the fine parcels owned and farmed *biodynamically* by Louis Roederer, not far from some of his own plots, but then he would point to a much more chemically-barren plot of grey earth and note that “this grower also sells to Louis Roederer”, so the next big challenge for Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon at Maison Roederer will clearly be how to bring the *vignerons* from whom they still purchase grapes to join the movement for a far healthier *vignobles* in Champagne. Keep in mind that Louis Roederer owns enough vineyards to produce fully seventy percent of their production needs, and most of their grapes are organically or *biodynamically* farmed these days, so the percentage of grapes that they are bringing in is not all that significant in their overall picture, but it will probably mark a viticultural turning point for the region as a whole when and if they can persuade the *vignerons* from whom they purchase grapes to join their program of far more healthy and sustainable vineyard husbandry.

Despite the rather dramatic differences in the viticultural philosophies in evidence in comparing Maison Roederer's own organic vineyards, with those nearby from whom they purchase grapes, the worst looking plots that I saw while walking around in Cumières with Monsieur Laval were adjacent vineyards owned by the Champagne house of Joseph Perrier, which in my opinion, looked to be nearly dead, except for the rows of vines sticking up out of the harshly grey and bleached-looking soils. All I could think of was if vines could have grown in Mordor, this is what they would have looked like! To be fair, my visit here was on March 25<sup>th</sup>, and once the vineyards turn green with leaves and young bunches, much of the barrenness in evidence at the time of my visit will be carpeted under a sea of green, but there still can be no mistake about the relative health and long-term prospects of the parcels that are farmed here by organic or *biodynamique* principals. And do keep in mind that the spring of 2014 is a very, very early year in the region, as the winter was very, very mild and the vineyards were several weeks in advance of a “normal year” when I was there in late March, so the lunar landscape in some of these plots of vines is clearly a result of the viticultural philosophies employed by the owners of the parcels (in this case Joseph Perrier), rather than just the last vestiges of winter hanging on in the vines in late March. So there is still a lot of work to do out in the vineyard in this magical region, and I can only imagine how much better the resulting wines will be when the day finally

comes somewhere down the road and a far larger number of the grape growers in Champagne catch up with most of their brethren in more forward-looking regions like Burgundy or the Loire Valley.



*A not so healthy-looking vineyard parcel owned by Joseph Perrier in the village of Cumières.*

Certainly, the Champagne region is not alone- far from it- in lagging a bit behind the most forward-thinking *vignerons* around the globe when it comes to sustainable vineyard husbandry. Bordeaux is another well-known region that is a far cry from practicing good and healthy vineyard management on a widespread basis, and it often seems that there is a very direct correlation between the amount of money involved and the unwillingness to take perceived risks in the vineyards and move away from heavy chemical treatments in the vineyards. Movements at estates like Château Latour in Pauillac to switch to organic and eventually, *biodynamique* methods of viticulture are very important, but they remain a drop in the bucket for the moment, and for every full-blooded *biodynamique* estate such as Pontet-Canet in Bordeaux, there must be hundreds still wed to the chemically-based vineyard husbandry of yesteryear. The same can be said in Champagne, as this is a very big region, and there are a lot of vines owned by fairly small holders who clearly feel that they must maximize their production each year to keep their families fed, but one hopes that a system will be eventually set up to add incentives to these smaller-scaled producers to make the switch to organic or *biodynamic* methods. Anselme Selosse has been preaching this mantra for years, and the brilliant quality of his own wines very clearly

have a percentage of their foundations in the far more enlightened and sustainable viticultural practices he has followed for years and years, and there is a growing cadre of like-minded Grower-Récoltants who share his philosophy in the vineyards. The next big leap will come when more *Grandes Marques* come to embrace this philosophy of vineyard sustainability, following the lead of Louis Roederer, and the market starts to pay a premium for grapes grown under saner and less chemically-invasive methods of agriculture. For clearly, when one looks at a region like Burgundy (where the trend has firmly taken root), the quality of the fruit grown in organic and *biodynamically*-farmed vineyards is clearly finer and it has also very clearly resulted in higher quality wines in the last several years. It is quite easy to imagine that a bit higher prices paid for grapes grown by small, independent farmers in Champagne who start to move away from chemically-based viticulture could easily gain momentum in the years to come and we could finally see the quality of the *vignobles* here catch up with the quality of the wines. But, clearly, as long as things remain as they are in the vineyards in Champagne, there remains one last frontier yet to be conquered and help usher in the most golden of ages in this large and lovely region.



*Vincent Laval in one of his vineyards in Cumières- probably 100 meters from that Joseph Perrier plot.*

My visit to the Champagne region this year allowed for a very fine look at several recent vintages, and as some of these years begin to gain a bit more age to them, the overall quality and style of each year is beginning to come more sharply into focus. I continue to get more and more

excited about the ultimate potential of the 2004 vintage in Champagne, which has turned out a fine crop of structured and racy wines that should prove to be outstanding in the fullness of time. The vintage is a bit surprising as a top-flight Champagne year, as it was one of the largest harvests ever recorded in the region, and it really is a bit of a miracle that the vines were able to fully ripen the absolutely enormous crop loads produced in 2004. But, keep in mind that the scorching growing season of 2003 that preceded 2004 played a key role in both the size and quality of the 2004 crop, as the long-suffering vines in the summer of 2003 were able to store up enormous, untapped energy resources from that year that went into producing such a large crop and then the reserves to actually ripen this huge number of grapes. The wines of '04 started out life tight, lean and a tad on the green side, but they have come out from behind their youthful structural elements and are likely to age into absolute classics, perhaps much along the lines of the 1988s. The following two years of 2005 and 2006 were both quite ripe and more typical of high quality, very good (but not exceptional) years in the region, and as time has gone by, I have been finding that the 2005 vintage dated bottlings generally are presenting firmer and more classic structures to go along with their generous and quite attractive fruit components, and I find that I am now more inclined to drink my 2006-based wines first, and give the 2005-based wines more time in the cellar. Both vintages have their charms, but the '05s are going to be far better to keep around in the cellar and a great many of the '06s are fully enjoyable right now and are probably offering up their peaks of drinkability at the present time (or, in the case of *Têtes de Cuvées*, will do so over the next dozen years or so).

As I noted last year, both 2007 and 2008 were atypical years, with warm springs followed by unseasonably cool and wet mid-summers, and while neither year has produced classic wines, both years have their merits, as the *fins de saisons* each September helped produce quite successful crops. The 2007 year is purported to be strongest for the chardonnay grape, whereas 2008 was equally successful across the board for both white and red varieties, and on this recent trip, I began to see some successful, vintage-dated wines from both years. As was the case in Burgundy, both 2007 and 2008 will produce some very serious wines and these should not be ignored because of the less than fabulous reputations of these two vintages. Probably 2008 is overall the stronger of the two years, but there will be wines from both years that will delight. The 2009 vintage in Champagne was again quite ripe and very classic in style, and I have seen little over the course of the last year not to maintain a lot of excitement for the superb potential of this year in Champagne. Unlike the two preceding years, the mid-summer was exceptional-warm, but not too hot, sunny and the quality of the fruit brought in throughout the month of September was very clean, very nicely ripe and very, very promising. Some *vignerons* in the region have remarked that the vintage is particularly strong for pinot noir, but it seems likely that all of the major grape varieties have produced excellent wines in 2009. The vintage has already drawn some early comparisons to 1982, 1985 and 1990, so there is a lot to be excited about. As I noted last year, when handicapping a fairly large number of non-vintage cuvées from Grower-Récoltants based primarily on 2009 fruit, I really like what I have tasted thus far from this vintage and expect that there are a lot of vinous fireworks resting on their lees in the cool *Champenois* cellars for future tasting pleasure. The 2010 vintage was far more problematic than either 2008 or the exemplary grapes of 2009, as a torrent of rain fell in mid-August and set off all sorts of problems for *vignerons* in the region. Grey rot, botrytis and rain-burst grapes in the most water-retentive, clay soils were constant problems from the moment the deluge finished (two months' worth of rainfall fell between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> of August in 2010!), and pinot noir



suffered the most of any variety in this year. Where selection was draconian, there was still pretty good quality to work with, and by all reports, chardonnay fared the best of all the major grape varieties in 2010, but selection is going to be key to making high quality wines with fruit from this difficult vintage.

I should note that my visit here to the region showed that the very low or zero *dosage* trend that we have seen from the Champagne region in the last five years or so continues to gain adherents, but perhaps with a bit less of the ideological zeal than what was there at the outset. I found that more of the Extra Brut or Brut Nature bottlings that I sampled on this trip were better balanced than has been the case in the past, so that the borderline “sour austerity” that plagued some examples of this genre in the past were far less prevalent during my tastings at the various houses. Of course, it is also possible that my overall greater satisfaction with this level of bottlings during my week in the region also reflected the quality of the producers who I had on my itinerary during the weeks’ worth of tastings. There is an additional, auxiliary trend that is a bi-product of this current fashion of low or no *dosage* for many bottlings, and that is that the overall levels of *dosage* at many houses are down by a few grams per liter for many bottlings of Brut, and it is no longer rare to find Brut bottlings with *dosage* levels of four or five grams per liter that could officially qualify as Extra Brut labeling, even if the proprietors prefer still to market the wines as Brut despite their lower levels of *dosage*. For example, Taittinger has lowered the *dosage* for its non-vintage Brut bottling by two grams per liter in the last few years, and all of the Bruno Paillard current non-vintage bottlings that I sampled from could be labeled as Extra Brut (six grams per liter of residual sugar or less), but all are labeled as Brut. Bruno Paillard has long been famous for preferring lower *dosage* levels, but even here, the house’s superb Première Cuvée bottling has moved from a *dosage* of eight grams per liter back in 2007 to six grams per liter today.

One of the interesting new arrivals on the scene in Champagne on my recent visit was the spread of a new Champagne glass specially designed by the head sommelier at the Michelin-starred restaurant, Les Crayères in Reims, Philippe Jamesse. These beautiful glasses are designed to bridge the gap between the traditional flute and white wine glasses, which have been growing in popularity for the serving of Champagne in the last several years, but which for me, fall short in protecting the *mousse* in the wine and are not satisfactory for that reason. The new glasses designed by Monsieur Jamesse in the last year or two offer a wider bowl than is customary in most Champagne flutes (other than the great glasses that Riedel produces for Krug), but with a tulip shape that tapers in markedly at the top of the glass and manages to protect the *mousse* in much the same manner as a classic flute. The Jamesse glasses therefore allow for far more dramatic expression of the aromatics in the Champagne served in them, which of course is the motivation behind using a white wine glass, but with a unique shape that allows the bubbles to remain vigorous throughout the life of the open bottle, so that one does not have to sacrifice the *mousse* to have the far more expressive aromatics. The glasses are really quite beautiful in appearance and their utility is superb, as I had the chance to use them during my visit to Charles Heidsieck (who has quickly incorporated them into their service repertoire) and during my lunch at Le Jardin, the fine bistro associated with Les Crayères and situated on their grounds. I have seen the glasses available for sale at several sources in the United Kingdom and also with K and L Wine Merchants in California. I have only used the hand-blown version, but I understand that there is also a machine-blown version of the glass produced. They are well worth investigating if

one is looking for a larger bowl to unlock the aromatics in the Champagne faster and better than a traditional flute, and are far better than a white wine glass for serving Champagne.

In the past I have included lists of my absolute favorite Grower-Récoltant producers here, and I do not see any reason for reprinting it this year, as the names that have been impressive for their superb quality remain so today. For readers who may be new to the newsletter and have not yet seen this list, email me and I can send a copy of the most recent listing, or this information can be readily accessed through the database. However, I should note one producer who was new to me on this trip, though I probably should have known about him already. His name is Alexandre Chartogne and he has been running his family's domaine, Chartogne-Taillet, on the Montagne de Reims in the village of Merfy for a few years now, despite his only now closing in on his thirtieth birthday. Prior to taking over the reins of his family's small property, he worked for several years with Anselme Selosse in Avize. In fact, it was Nathalie Rossillon at Les Avizés who alerted me to the very high quality of the Chartogne-Taillet wines, and I quickly followed her suggestion and ordered a bottle of his Les Barres *lie à dit* bottling to have with dinner on my second evening at their lovely restaurant. It was very clear from the first glass that Alexandre Chartogne is one of the young rising stars in the Champagne region, as his wines are deep, very *terroir*-specific and brilliantly precise and long. Believe me, I will be making a pilgrimage to the village of Merfy on my next trip to Champagne! I was very happy to learn when I emailed Monsieur Chartogne that Terry Theise already represented his wines here in the US, and Terry very graciously arranged to send me a representative sampling of the current releases from Chartogne-Taillet for inclusion in this article. He also generously included a large collection of his other growers' current releases for this feature as well, which filled in a hole in the Champagne coverage in the newsletter that was long overdue in being addressed, as this was the first time I had been able to taste comprehensively through the Terry Theise portfolio of grower Champagnes in many, many years (I was still a sommelier at Gotham Bar and Grill the last time I worked through a sizable contingent of Mr. Theise's Champagne producers, so it had been quite some time). Consequently, I was able to not only savor a variety of Monsieur Chartogne's dynamite bottlings, but also caught up with a lot of other producers who I had not tasted since the days of yore.

There is also another Grower-Récoltant whose wines I tasted on this trip that merits a special mention. Benoit Marguet of Marguet Père et Fils in Ambonnay is really starting to produce wines at a new and very exciting level in his career and the new releases that I have tasted for this report from Monsieur Marguet are must purchases for connoisseurs of Champagne. I have tasted several of the Marguet Père et Fils bottlings in the past and found them quite good, but not in the top division. However, things have changed here in the last several years and we are just now beginning to see the fruits from the dramatic changes that Benoit has brought about at his family's property. The family has vines in their home village of Ambonnay, as well as Bouzy and Mailly, and Benoit has now turned to farming them under *biodynamique* principles in recent times, and the quality of the fruit has quite obviously grown exponentially. He has also very much refined his winemaking techniques (and perhaps been given more of a free rein in the decision making by his family), and there are a number of new, single vineyard bottlings now waiting in the wings (or in the cellars) that will soon find their way onto the market. The first of these that I have tasted, Les Crayères, from the vineyard of the same name in Ambonnay, is a profoundly beautiful bottle of young Champagne and a very strong indication of

what is on the horizon from Marguet Père et Fils. I cannot wait to taste some of the others that are now resting on their lees in the Marguet cellars.



Benoit Marguet is also producing a new, organic *Tête de Cuvée* bottling called Sapience, which he makes from purchased grapes from nearby friends' vineyards (rather than the family's own vines) which is utterly magical and one of the most beautiful bottles of Champagne that I tasted in preparation for this report. And mind, it is not just the single vineyard or prestige bottlings that have moved up a quantum leap in quality at this domaine, as the new release of the Marguet non-vintage Brut and non-vintage Brut Rosé are also very, very special and light years above what was being produced here by the past methodology. Previously, I had noted that the Marguet wines were good, solid examples of their respective genres, with quite good complexity, but perhaps a bit coarse in their *mousse* and not always particularly long in the palate. However, those days are now over and the new releases here must begin to be ranked right up at the pinnacle of Grower-Récoltant bottlings and this is now one of the most exciting addresses in all of Champagne! By the way, an easy indicator of whether or not you have one of the "new and improved" cuvées from Benoit Marguet is to look at the color of the bottle- if it is dark emerald green, then it is one of the older releases (the good, but not great camp), but if the bottle is made from light brown glass, then it is one of the new cuvées and very much worthy of buying in quantity and putting away in the cellar. I cannot emphasize strongly enough how dramatic the change is here and how stunning these new wines are from Benoit Marguet! Rest assured, that I



will be knocking at his door in Ambonnay on my next trip to the region and we will see a proper domaine feature on the estate in the very near future.

The following notes are arranged in what has become my customary format for these large Champagne features. We start, as usual, with relatively short domaine profiles for the estates I visited on the trip in late March. As I was able to spend a full week in the region, the roster is far more in-depth in this section than has been customary in the past editions of this report. Within the section devoted to each Champagne house that I visited, I have listed them in the order of my travel schedule, so one can get a sense of how my week unfolded here in the region. Where I have written more extensively in the past about a domaine, I have kept the introductory remarks a bit more concise than is my usual wont, and refer readers back to previous Champagne articles for fuller sketches of the estate, if they are in need of more depth on the estate. Within each subsection on a Champagne house visited, I have also added in the same section any other wines that I have tasted from this producer since the last Champagne article was released, so that readers can find all of the recent notes, for example from Champagne Gosset, in the subsection devoted to my visit there, even if the wine in question may have been drunk out of my cellar here in New York a few months prior to my trip. After the short domaine profiles, one will find the individual bottles tasted in preparation for this report, arranged by type of wine. First comes non-Champagne sparkling wines (without any notes on the great Spanish sparkling wine of Cava, which I have preferred to feature in their own section in the Spanish wine article in this same issue), followed by examples of Non-Vintage Extra Brut (as well as Brut Nature and Brut Zero), Non-Vintage Blanc de Blancs, Non-Vintage Blanc de Noirs, Non-Vintage Brut, Non-Vintage Brut (or Extra Brut) Rosé, Vintage-Dated Blanc de Blancs, Vintage-Dated Brut and Extra Brut and Vintage-Dated Brut Rosé. Within each non-vintage subsection, the wines are arranged alphabetically by producer, and for vintage-dated subsections, the wines are sorted first by age from youngest to oldest, and alphabetically by producer within each vintage-organized subsection. Where the information is available, I have also included the date of disgorgement for the wine and its base year (if it is a non-vintage bottling). As I have done for the last few years, readers will also find an index of wines covered in this large feature at the start of the article, to make it a bit easier to scan through the long lineup and see what wines are covered in this report.

It seems almost crazy with nearly one hundred pages of coverage on Champagne that this feature is still not complete, but a number of my favorite estates were in the midst of preparing and shipping new releases for the market and consequently, a significant number of my favorite producers' wines are not included in this article. However, those new releases are already on the water from France and I will be receiving samples in the next few weeks, so there is already an article in the pipeline to address those holes in this report. As I have done in the last couple of years, there will be a Champagne Addendum article in one of the next two issues, depending on when the samples arrive here in New York, how large the pile of bottles turns out to be, and how quickly I can get the notes written up and included in an upcoming issue of the newsletter. I fully realize that a report of this scale is rather unwieldy for most subscribers, and for those who find the size of this report a bit over the top, I remind everyone that the spirit of these larger sections is to serve as a reference work for the year and even if it is a bit too vast for quick consumption now, I hope over the course of coming year, the inclusive nature of the coverage on the region will be useful if one crosses paths with any number of bottles that are unfamiliar. As has been the

case for the last couple of years, this year's work on Champagne has uncovered several new (to me) Grower-Récoltants that are making simply stellar wines, and in the upcoming addendum, I will also include an updated list of these small domaines who make wines that strike me as the finest of their respective categories, as the last listing does not include these estates.

### ***Domaines Visited During My Week in the Region***

#### **Pol Roger (Épernay)**

*I had a fairly short visit to Pol Roger, as this was my first time tasting sur place at the maison and I arrived quite late for my appointment, due to a Manhattan quality traffic jam on the major route between Reims and Épernay. It turned out that it was probably a pretty good thing that I did not have a long tasting here, as this was also my first stop of my week in Champagne and I was already starting to really feel the effects of the bad oysters the evening before, and this was one of the most difficult tastings I have ever gotten through. These days, Pol Roger owns fully eighty-nine hectares of vineyards, which is enough to cover fifty-five percent of their production needs, with the vast, vast majority of the forty-five percent that they have to purchase grapes to provide for coming from a series of long-term contracts with growers that they have worked with for generations. Before my visit, I was unaware that Pol Roger continues to hand-riddle fully one hundred percent of its production, employing four of the remaining ten people in the region who do the hand riddling of bottles. The house also tends to age its non-vintage Brut cuvée longer than most of the Grandes Marques, as it rests fully three and a half years on its lees prior to disgorgement and release on the market. The time spent on the lees is even longer for the other wines in their portfolio- seven years for the Vintage Brut Rosé, nine years for the Blanc de Blancs Vintage and eleven years for their Cuvée Winston Churchill. As most readers already know, this is one of the finest of the Grandes Marques, as well as one of the smallest, as its production is absolutely dwarfed by its next door neighbors on the Avenue de Champagne in Épernay, Perrier-Jouët and (a bit further down the street) Moët et Chandon, and the lineup of current releases that we worked through on the morning of my visit were as superb as customary at this fine house. The United Kingdom remains, by a very wide margin, the most important market for Pol Roger, with the long history of this market and this house still as strong and vibrant as ever, and in fact, outside the main offices of the maison, the Union Jack flies right alongside the Tri-Colors of France. As this was my first visit to Pol Roger, the tasting after we had completed a tour of the chais and cellars was not particularly large, but the wines were every bit as exceptional as one has come to expect with this consistently outstanding Grande Marque.*

#### **Pol Roger “Pure” Extra Brut NV**

The new release of the Pol Roger “Pure” is comprised primarily of base wine from the 2009 vintage and it is probably the finest example of this relatively new cuvée that I have yet tasted from the maison. While this is labeled as Extra Brut, it is actually a Brut Zero, as it has absolutely no *dosage*. The bouquet is very lovely, offering up scents of lemon, tart apple, bread dough, a fine base of chalky minerality and a gentle topnote of spring flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and beautifully balanced, with crisp acids, fine focus, elegant *mousse* and excellent length and grip. In my opinion, past renditions of the Pure have been a bit tight and in need of a bit of further bottle age when they have been released, but this release is going to hit on all cylinders right from the outset. 2014-2030. 92+.

#### **2004 Pol Roger Brut Millésime**

The 2004 Pol Roger Brut Millésime is absolutely outstanding. The wine is comprised of a blend of sixty percent pinot noir and forty percent chardonnay, with all of the grapes hailing from grand cru vineyards. The exceptional bouquet wafts from the glass in a blend of pear, apple, warm bread, a nice touch of spice tones, a superb base of chalky minerality and a gentle smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and rock solid at the core, with great focus and balance, very refined, pinpoint bubbles, zesty acids and a very elegant, very long and classy finish. Great juice. 2014-2045+. **94.**

#### **2002 Pol Roger Blanc de Blanc Brut Millésime**

The 2002 Pol Roger Blanc de Blancs is a superb wine that is just starting to drink well, but it is still quite clearly early days for this lovely wine and more complexity will emerge with further bottle age. The deep and classy nose delivers a blend of pear, delicious apples, chalky minerality, orange zest and a topnote of warm brioche. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with excellent focus and grip, elegant *mousse*, zesty acids and excellent balance on the very long finish. A beautiful wine. 2014-2030+. **94.**

#### **2000 Pol Roger “Cuvée Winston Churchill”**

The 2000 Pol Roger “Cuvée Winston Churchill” is going to be an outstanding vintage for this fine bottling. The *cépages* this year is roughly eighty-five percent pinot noir and fifteen percent chardonnay (my host did not have the exact breakdown with him), the *dosage* was eight grams per liter and the wine is just now entering the market after eleven years on its lees. The wine offers up a fine, youthful nose of apple, tart orange, a very complex base of minerality, brioche, smoke and a fine dollop of citrus zest in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nascently complex, with a rock solid core of fruit, excellent focus and grip, elegant *mousse*, brisk acids and outstanding length and grip on the racy and intensely flavored finish. A fine, fine example of Winston Churchill, I would give the 2000 vintage a good four or five years in the cellar to start to blossom before opening it with conviction. It should age very well indeed. 2018-2060. **95+.**

#### **2006 Pol Roger Brut Rosé**

The 2006 Pol Roger Brut Rosé is comprised of a blend of sixty-five percent pinot noir and thirty-five percent chardonnay, with the customary fifteen percent of the pinot noir made up of still wine. I have always loved the Pol Roger Rosé and the 2006 vintage is another in a long line of excellent releases, wafting from the glass in a blend of blood orange, smoke, caraway seed, chalky minerality and citrus zest. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite broad-shouldered in profile, with a rock solid core, refined *mousse*, a very elegant personality, superb focus and balance, zesty acids and a very long, vinous and complex finish. Great juice. 2014-2035+. **94.**

#### **1990 Pol Roger Blanc de Blanc Brut Millésime**

The 1990 Pol Roger Blanc de Blancs is fully mature and already into that lovely, old and nutty phase of great old Champagne. The bouquet is a blend of backed peaches and pears, warm biscuits, lovely minerality, just a touch of oxidative nuances, caraway seeds and a very smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and a bit fresher in its flavor profile than what the nose suggests. The mid-palate has lovely depth, the *mousse* remains frothy and vigorous, and the wine has a long, vibrant and complex finish. This is still a beautiful wine for near-term drinking, but the incipient oxidation on the nose suggests that it is nearing the far side of its plateau and will begin to descent in the not too distant future. 2014-2019+? **93.**



*The offices of Pol Roger, located just around the corner from their cellars on the Avenue de Champagne.*

### **Champagne Gosset (Épernay)**

*This was my second visit to Champagne Gosset and their new cellars in Épernay, and this turned out to be a very good thing, as I was really starting to feel the effects of my food poisoning and to have the opportunity to proceed immediately to the tasting was very much appreciated in the throes of my digestive misery on this particular afternoon. Gosset has been based in these cellars in Épernay since 2009, when the Cointreau family, which purchased the house in 1994, bought this facility from Laurent-Perrier. It is not large enough to provide one hundred percent of the bottle storage needed to meet Gosset's current sales of one million bottles per annum, but along with their old cellars in Ay, the house now has ample cellaring space for their wines prior to release. My host for this visit was Nathalie Dufour, who is responsible for Public Relations for the maison. While Gosset is the oldest house in all of Champagne, having been founded in 1584, this superb house is not immune to change and there was something new on my visit here at the end of March, as the maison is in the midst of rolling out a new label and packaging for its non-vintage Brut Excellence, which had just been released in France and was due out in their export markets in the next few months. Besides changing the label, the Brut Excellence has also now made the transition to a one hundred percent malolactic Champagne, whereas before, it had been a wine that only had a percentage of the blend undergoing malo. As readers may recall, Gosset is one of the most important houses to generally eschew malolactic fermentation for their Champagne, and the Brut Excellence is the only cuvée*

*at Gosset that undergoes any malo at all; however, it makes sense to my mind to transition this bottling to a full malolactic wine, as this practice tends to soften up the youthful acidity a bit and makes the wine drink with much more generosity out of the blocks- which is when most non-vintage Brut bottlings are drunk. I have always been impressed by the superb quality of the Brut Excellence from Gosset, but it has never really caught on in the market as much as its fine quality deserves (often making it an outstanding value!), and hopefully the switch to one hundred percent malo for this bottling will help it gain a wider audience. Certainly the change here for this bottling has not cost the wine any of its racy and precisely focused personality. I had the pleasure to taste the full lineup of current releases at Gosset on this visit, and there are some absolutely brilliant bottles of bubbly emerging right now from this great old house. Visiting and tasting at Gosset is always one of the highlights of my trips to Champagne and I was very sorry to be so ill from my food poisoning this time around and needing to taste as quickly as possible to get back to my sick bed, as these stellar Champagne bottlings are very much worth savoring over an extended period of time!*

### **Gosset Brut Excellence NV**

The new release of Brut Excellence is comprised of 2009 vintage base wine, with its reserve wines hailing from 2008. The wine was disgorged in March of 2013, with a *dosage* of eleven grams per liter. The wine offers up an excellent bouquet of apple, pear, lovely minerality, bread dough, white flowers and gentle smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with a fine core, elegant *mousse*, crisp acids and a long, classy finish. Really a lovely bottle of Brut NV. 2014-2025+. **90.**

### **Gosset Grande Blanc de Blancs Brut NV**

Two years ago, when I first crossed paths with this new cuvée from Gosset, I was absolutely thrilled by its quality. The current release is every bit as stellar, being comprised of a blend of 2008, 2007 and 2006 vintages, with all of the grapes hailing from grand cru or top premier cru villages such as Trépail or Villers-Marmery. The wine is aged fully four years on the lees and is outstanding, wafting from the glass in a fine aromatic blend of pear, lemon, brioche, chalky minerality and lemon zest. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with a fine core of fruit, very refined *mousse*, excellent focus and grip and a very long, bright and tightly-knit finish. This is certainly approachable out of the blocks, but a couple of years' worth of bottle age will really let this wine come into its own. An outstanding Blanc de Blancs. 2014-2035. **94.**

### **Gosset Grande Réserve Brut NV**

I really love the pinot meunier component in Gosset's Grande Réserve bottling, which is once again fifteen percent in the current release. This wine was aged for five years on the lees and is a blend of 2008, 2007 and 2006 vintages and was disgorged in July of 2012. The nose is absolutely superb on this iconic bottling, offering up scents of apple, fresh-baked bread, orange zest, a beautifully complex base of soil tones and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with lovely focus and balance, excellent *mousse*, zesty acids and outstanding length and grip on the pure and toasty finish. A fine, fine bottle of bubbly. 2014-2035+. **93+.**

### **Gosset Grande Réserve Brut NV (Épernay) Cellared since August 2011**

This particular bottle of Gosset Grande Réserve had been in my cellar since the summer of 2011 and was tasted here in New York- it has aged very well indeed. The maturing nose wafts from the glass in a complex mélange of apple, peach, fresh almonds, a lovely base of soil tones,

wheat toast and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with crisp acids, excellent focus and balance, lovely mid-palate depth, elegant and still very vibrant *mousse* and a long, pure and utterly refined finish. This wine is now into its apogee, but will continue to cruise along at this fine plateau for at least another decade. 2014-2025+. **92+**.

#### **2004 Gosset Grande Millésime Brut**

The 2004 Gosset Grande Millésime is a superb example of this fine vintage, having been disgorged in March of 2012 and being comprised of a classic blend of fifty-five percent chardonnay and forty-five percent pinot noir. The bouquet is deep, pure and beautiful, wafting from the glass in a blend of apple, a touch of almond, lovely minerality, incipient notes of pastry cream, plenty of smokiness and a gentle floral topnote that is redolent of lavender. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and absolutely rock solid at the core, with superb balance and complexity, pinpoint bubbles, snappy acidity and excellent length and grip on the very classy finish. I would give this outstanding vintage of Grande Millésime a couple more years of bottle age to really let its secondary layers of complexity emerge, and then drink it with great pleasure over the ensuing twenty to twenty-five years. 2016-2040+. **94+**.

#### **Gosset Grande Rosé Brut NV**

The current release of the Gosset Grande Rosé is primarily based on the 2008 vintage (with five percent reserve wines in the blend) and is a blend of fifty-eight percent chardonnay and forty-two percent pinot noir (with eight percent of the pinot being still red wine in the blend). The Gosset Grande Rosé has always been one of my favorite examples of rosé Champagne, with its pale salmon color and its great elegance. This new release is superb, offering up a pure and complex nose of strawberries, mandarin oranges, chalky minerality, smoke, a touch of cinnamon and a topnote of rose petals. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, zesty and impressively light on its feet, with a great core of fruit, elegant and frothy *mousse*, excellent focus and a very long, well-balanced and refined finish. High class juice! 2014-2035. **93+**.

#### **2002 Gosset Cuvée Celebris Extra Brut**

This was my first taste of the 2002 Gosset Cuvée Celebris and the wine is absolutely brilliant. It was comprised of a blend of fifty-two percent chardonnay and forty-eight percent pinot noir in this outstanding vintage and offers up a stunning nose of apple, brioche, a youthful touch of orange peel, a very complex base of soil tones, smokiness, white flowers and a nice touch of fresh almond in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and absolutely bottomless in the mid-palate, with snappy acids, laser-like focus, elegant *mousse* and great length and grip on the very pure, youthful finish. This is probably the greatest young vintage of Cuvée Celebris I have ever had the pleasure to taste and one of the reference point bottlings from the 2002 vintage! 2020-2060. **97**.

#### **2007 Gosset Cuvée Celebris Rosé Extra Brut**

The 2007 Gosset Cuvée Celebris Rosé is equally magical. The *cépages* is fifty-nine percent chardonnay and forty-one percent pinot noir, with seven percent of the pinot being red still wine to give this wine its delicate salmon color and its lovely aura of vinosity. The magical bouquet wafts from the glass in a blend of tangerine, fresh apricot, a touch of rye toast, chalky minerality, smoke, orange blossoms and a gentle topnote of cinnamon stick. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and very, very refined in personality, with a superb core, pinpoint bubbles, zesty acids and stunning length and grip on the supremely elegant finish. A great, great wine. 2014-2035+. **96**.

### **Champagne Henriot (Reims)**

*I had a quick visit to Champagne Henriot in late March, as I was still in need of further recovery from my food poisoning, and we worked through a few of the new releases at our late morning appointment on my second full day in the region. I had the pleasure to be hosted again by Béatrice Brossier, who is Henriot's Director for visits at the estate. I was surprised to see a chic new decanter set prominently displayed at the Henriot tasting room, which the maison has developed specifically for use with their non-vintage Blanc de Blancs bottling, which they feel greatly benefits from decanting just prior to serving to help the wine blossom a bit when young from behind its youthful structural elements. This bottling is certainly a bit tight out of the blocks in most years, as it is beautifully built to age gracefully (and has a very fine track record in the cellar, at least in my experience), but I was a bit surprised to hear a serious Champagne house advocating the decantation of one of their wines. I asked about the retention of the mousse when decanting the Blanc de Blancs, which is my greatest objection to decanting Champagne in the first place, as I have little interest in sacrificing the bubbles in my bubbly. I was assured that if the bottle is poured very gently into the decanter, and that the decanter is chilled prior to using it, then the bubbles are retained quite nicely and losing the mousse is not an issue. I was intrigued to try this out for myself, but Maison Henriot did not have a decanter chilled at the time of my visit, so the process still remains beyond the range of my personal experience and I cannot comment firsthand on its utility. As readers may recall, Joseph Henriot had to sell nearly all of the maison's own vineyard parcels back when he was financing the purchase of Domaine William Fèvre in Chablis and Maison Bouchard Père et Fils in Beaune several years ago, but I continue to be very impressed with just how fine Henriot's sparkling wines remain, despite having to rely almost exclusively on purchased fruit to meet their production needs. The wines are always a bit tight out of the blocks in my experience, and this is one house that I very happily tuck their new releases of non-vintage wines in the cellar for an additional year or two of bottle age, prior to starting to drink them with conviction. The change that comes over them once they have really had a chance to blossom is most impressive, and I continue to strongly urge readers to start cellaring Champagne as they would any other serious, ageworthy category of wine, as the rewards of bubbly with some bottle age (even the non-vintage blends) becomes readily apparent once time has had the opportunity to march a couple of years past the pile of Champagne bottles in the cellar.*

### **Henriot "Brut Souverain" NV (Reims)**

The new release of Henriot's "Brut Souverain" non-vintage bottling was tasted here in New York in June, rather than at the maison at the end of March. The wine is a blend of chardonnay, pinot noir and just a touch of pinot meunier and includes twenty percent *vins de reserves*. The bouquet is bright and really quite classy, delivering scents of apple, quince, bread dough, a complex base of soil, smoky overtones and just a whisper of meunier floral tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and still quite youthful, with a fine core, brisk acids, very elegant *mousse* and a long, nascently complex and snappy finish. This is a very good non-vintage Brut, but it really needs a year's worth of bottle age to soften up and start to hit on all cylinders. 2015-2030. **90.**

### **Henriot "Blanc Souverain" Brut NV (Reims)**

The new release of the Blanc de Blancs non-vintage bottling from Maison Henriot, which is certainly one of the cornerstones of their lineup, is based on the 2006 vintage and was showing lovely potential, but will benefit from a bit of bottle age to allow the aforementioned structural



elements here to peel back a bit and allow the wine to really blossom on the palate. The bouquet is first rate, offering up scents of fresh pear, lemon, chalky minerality, bread dough, spring flowers and a gentle whiff of smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and youthfully tight, with fine focus, brisk acids, a sound core and elegant *mousse* on the long, balanced and snappy finish. I would love to compare this showing to a bottle that had been through the specially-designed decanter to see the difference! 2015-2030+. **90.**

#### **Henriot Brut Rosé NV (Reims)**

The current release of Henriot's Brut Rosé is a blend of chardonnay and pinot noir, with twenty-five percent reserve wines in the blend. Like the other non-vintage wines in the portfolio, this is very well-made and still a tad on the young side for primetime drinking, as it offers up a bright and youthfully complex nose of white cherries, tangerine, sourdough bread, lovely soil tones and a gentle topnote of smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite brisk in personality, with a good core of fruit, frothy *mousse* and very fine length and grip on the youthful and very promising finish. This is certainly drinkable today, but a year in the cellar will allow its structural elements to relax a bit and the wine to really start hitting on all cylinders. 2015-2025+. **90.**

#### **2005 Henriot Brut Millésime (Reims)**

The 2005 Henriot Brut Millésime is comprised of a fifty-fifty blend of chardonnay and pinot noir and is made up entirely of fruit from either grand cru or premier cru vineyards. The wine spent six years on its lees prior to disgorgement and has a *dosage* of 9.5 grams per liter. The wine is still youthfully reticent, but offers up a complex mélange of green apple, tart orange, smoke, bread dough, stony minerality and citrus peel. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish, young and tightly-knit, with a fine core of fruit, superb focus, elegant *mousse*, and plenty of nascent complexity poking out from behind the brisk acids on the long and racy finish. This definitely needs some time in the cellar to blossom, but it will be excellent. 2017-2040. **92.**

#### **2006 Henriot Brut Millésime (Reims)**

The 2006 Brut Millésime is far more relaxed structurally at this point in time than the racy 2005 version, and this is clearly the vintage to drink earlier of the pair. This too is a blend of fifty percent chardonnay and fifty percent pinot noir and also spent six years aging on the lees prior to *dégorgement*. In contrast to the still very youthful 2005, the 2006 Brut Millésime is far more expressive and delivers a fine aromatic constellation of pear, apple, brioche, hints of pastry cream, orange peel, spring flowers and a fine base of chalky soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and wide open on the attack, with fine mid-palate concentration, pinpoint bubbles, crisp acids and fine length and grip on the focused and classy finish. There is no shortage of structure in the 2006 Henriot Brut Millésime, but this is coupled with early accessibility as well and makes this wine already a good drink out of the blocks. 2014-2040. **92+.**

#### **2008 Henriot Brut Millésime Rosé (Reims)**

The 2008 Henriot Brut Millésime Rosé is a lovely wine, with a very pale copper color and a young, but very nicely delineated bouquet of tart orange, wild strawberries, wheat toast, chalky minerality, smoke, dried flowers and a gentle topnote of spiciness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and focused, with frothy *mousse*, great backend mineral drive, superb balance and a very long, racy and precise finish. The wine closes with great length and grip and will be superb, but I would give it at least a couple of years in the cellar to fully blossom. 2016-2035. **93+.**

### **2005 Henriot Brut Millésime Rosé (Reims)**

The Henriot vintage-dated Rosés include eight percent still wine pinot noir in their blends, but are really very delicately-colored rosés, with the 2005 showing even a bit more copper color in the heart of the glass than the 2008 version. This too is a very lovely bottle of Brut Rosé, wafting from the glass in a mélange of dried strawberries, wheat toast, orange peel, cloves, a fine base of minerality and plenty of smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, long and complex, with a fien core, classy *mousse*, bright acids and a long, classy and wide open finish. Fine juice. 2014-2025+. **92+**.

### **1999 Henriot Cuvée Enchanteurs Brut (Reims) served from magnum**

The 1999 Henriot Cuvée Enchanteurs is a racy and beautifully structured example of this ripe vintage, as it shows great cut, minerality and precision on the palate. The outstanding and still fairly youthful nose wafts from the glass in a complex mix of apple, lemon, stony minerality, brioche, gentle smokiness and a lovely topnote of orange zest. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite generous on the attack, with a rock solid core of fruit, very refined, pinpoint bubbles, crisp acids and outstanding focus and grip on the very long and perfectly balanced finish. The 1999 Cuvée Enchanteurs really only shows its vintage's exuberance in its touch of plumpness on the attack, and the fact that it is uncharacteristically wide open in its relative youth, whereas recent vintages such as 1998, 1996 and 1995 Cuvée Enchanteurs were very tightly-knit at this stage in their evolutions. A beautiful wine. 2014-2035. **94**.

### **1998 Henriot Cuvée Enchanteurs Brut (Reims)**

The 1998 Cuvée Enchanteurs from Henriot is the customary fifty-fifty blend of chardonnay and pinot noir and the wine is excellent. The superb bouquet delivers a deep and still quite youthful mélange of apple, tangerine, warm bread, a lovely base of stony soil tones, gentle nuttiness and an exotic topnote of fresh rosemary. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with elegant *mousse*, fine mid-palate concentration and lovely balance and grip on the very long and quite poised finish. A beautiful wine that started out life quite tightly-knit, but is now starting to really blossom and drinking with great style. 2013-2035. **94+**.

### **Krug (Reims)**

*I had a short visit to Krug during my trip to Reims in late March, as I was still suffering the ill effects of my bad oysters thirty-six hours before and was not yet at the top of my game. However, as I had the pleasure to attend a couple of other Krug-centric events prior to my spring trip, I had a few more notes on the books already prior to my visit, so this worked out as well as can be, considering that I cannot think of a greater loss than not being able to taste well during a visit to maison Krug! Happily, Olivier Krug was in Reims at the time of my visit (a fairly rare occurrence to my mind, given the amazingly long and wide-ranging series of trips he has made to usher the new 2003 Krug Vintage bottling out into the market and make introductions between this lovely wine and Krug lovers the world over. So, we had a quite lunch in Reims together after our short tasting, and amazingly (this will give ample evidence that I was still under the weather from those oysters!) we did not even finish the bottle of 2003 Krug that we took with us to the restaurant. I have to really commend the restaurant, the Café du Palais, which is a very popular bistro during the lunch hour for movers and shakers in the city, with excellent fare and a superb wine list. My understanding is that the restaurant only serves small plates in the evenings, but one still has that wine list to work over once the sun sets and I look forward to several more visits here in the future. As I told Olivier Krug during our lunch, I have been using the Krug ID number more and more and find that the maison's solution to providing*

*information on base wines and approximate disgorgement dates of all their wines through their website is a wonderful service to Krug fans the world over. It allows for those interested in receiving all of the background information they desire on their particular bottles, by typing in their Krug ID number on the firm's website, without cluttering up the back labels for those Krug drinkers who really have no interest in the history of their particular bottle.*



*Chef de Cave Eric Lebel leading a vins clairs blending seminar at Champagne Krug.*

### **Krug Grande Cuvée Brut (ID #113006)**

This release of Grand Cuvée is the youngest with which I crossed paths over the last year, as it is comprised of a base vintage of 2006 and was disgorged in the winter of 2012-2013. The oldest reserve wines in the blend here are from the 1990 vintage. As has been my experience with Champagne based on the 2006 vintage, this is a fairly accessible example of Grande Cuvée out of the blocks and is really drinking very well right out of the blocks, offering up a superb bouquet of apple, wheat bread, a delicate touch of nectarine, complex minerality and a blossoming topnote of citrus zest. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and complex, with zesty acids, great focus and grip, tiny, pinpoint bubbles, a superb mid-palate and outstanding length and grip on the perfectly balanced, vibrant and complex finish. This is really drinking beautifully for such a young Grande Cuvée, and would be my pick for early consumption over the release based on the 2005 vintage, which is a bit more dominated by its

structure out of the blocks, but I would still be tempted to try and give this at least a couple of years in the cellar to more fully unwind. As always, a beautiful wine. 2016-2040+. **94+**.

**Krug Grande Cuvée Brut (ID #412042)**

The base wine for this particular bottling of Grande Cuvée was 2005, with the blend including reserve wines back to 1990, and the wine was disgorged in the fall of 2012. The bottle is absolutely lovely, offering up a pure and still quite youthful aromatic constellation of apple, white peach, smoke, a very complex base of minerality, caraway seed, orange zest and wheat toast. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and nascently complex, with a rock solid core of fruit, great soil signature, very refined *mousse*, brisk acids and a very long, focused and outstanding finish. I would still want to keep this fine release in the cellar for at least a few more years, as it is still very early days for this beautiful wine, and it will be even better to my palate with at least another four or five years of bottle age. 2018-2050. **94+**.

**Krug Grande Cuvée Brut (ID #113001)**

This is the identical wine to the above (ID #412042), with a base year of 2005 and reserve wines back to the 1990 vintage, but this wine was disgorged three or four months later (the winter of 2012-2013) and so spent a bit more time on its lees in the Krug cellars. I suppose that the different disgorgement dates should make a difference, but it is the same wine as the above and I really could not find a whole lot to differentiate between the two, as both wines are stellar. This bottling offers up a young and complex nose of apple, white peach, a beautiful base of minerality, Grande Cuvée's signature note of caraway seed, fresh-baked rye bread, orange zest and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine's complexity echoes the nose, with its full-bodied and impeccably balanced format rock solid at the core. The finish is very, very long, focused and the *mousse* is exemplary in its refinement. This is just a great bottle of Champagne at the early stages of its journey, and as good as it is today, it will be even better to drink in a decade's time. 2018-2050. **94+**.

**Krug Grande Cuvée Brut (ID #211021) "Memoire"**

This particular bottle of Grande Cuvée was tasted with Olivier Krug in March in Reims (though I did taste it also at the 2003 Vintage Unveiling in NY in January as well), and had the "Memoire" designation on the back label and represents one of the bottlings of Grande Cuvée that the house has left in the cellars a few more years to allow a bit more bottle age prior to release. The wine is from the base year of 2003 and includes reserve wines all the way back to the 1988 vintage in its *cépages*. The wine offers up a beautiful bouquet of apple, mandarin orange, brioche, a complex base of minerality, smoke, dried flowers, orange zest and a nice touch of honeyed nuttiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, round and very refined on the attack, with elegant *mousse*, superb mid-palate depth, gorgeous balance, crisp acids and lovely length and grip on the vibrant and complex finish. 2014-2040. **95**.

**2003 Krug Vintage Brut**

The 2003 vintage of Krug is truly an exceptional wine that beautifully synthesizes the exuberance of this very hot summer with the characteristic refinement and structural integrity that are the hallmarks of vintage Krug bottlings. 2003 was the first vintage to start picking in August in Champagne since 1822, so this is clearly a very unique year in the region. The chardonnay grape suffered the most in this torrid summer, and it only represents twenty-nine percent of the *cépages*, with twenty-five percent pinot meunier and forty-six percent pinot noir. The wine has turned out beautifully, with the heat of the summer translating into a very spicy and exotically aromatic vintage Krug, as it wafts from the glass in a complex constellation of cardamom, turmeric, apple, tangerine, white peach, gentle notes rye bread, a very complex base

of minerality, hints of the *crème patissière* to come and a topnote of lemon blossoms. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, very complex and refined, with lovely mineral drive, crisp acids, elegant *mousse* and excellent length and grip on the perfectly poised and light on its feet finish. I never anticipated that the 2003 vintage would turn out such and elegant, vibrant and exotic rendition of Krug Vintage, but this wine has turned out beautifully. It is drinking with great charm right out of the blocks, but will have no difficulties aging gracefully at least for a couple of decades. 2014-2035+. **94+**.

#### **2000 Krug Vintage Brut (ID #411050)**

The summer of 2000 saw a violent hailstorm strike on July 2<sup>nd</sup> of this year, which particularly decimated the vineyards north of Reims, but the remainder of the growing season was quite classic, with harvesting taking place over the fortnight between September 11<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>. The 2000 Krug Vintage was disgorged in the fall of 2011 and is a combination of forty-three percent pinot noir, forty-two percent chardonnay and fifteen percent pinot meunier. As I reported last year, the wine is a brilliant and utterly classic in the making, soaring from the glass in a beautifully blossoming blend of apple, clementine, brioche, a superb base of soil tones, incipient smokiness, citrus zest, caraway seed and a gentle topnote of *crème patissière* that will certainly become more pronounced with further bottle age. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with a rock solid core, very elegant *mousse*, brisk and buried acids and stellar grip and focus on the very long and very pure finish. A great, great wine in the making, but give it more time in the cellar to allow its secondary layers of complexity to emerge. 2019-2060. **96+**.

#### **Krug Brut Rosé (ID #113016)**

The new release of Krug Rosé is as blend of fifty-nine percent pinot noir, thirty-three percent chardonnay, eight percent pinot meunier and spent six years aging on the lees prior to disgorgement. This release is primarily base year 2006, but of course, includes a myriad of reserve wines. The cuvée offers up a brilliant and majestically understated nose of peach, tangerine, *fraises du bois*, exotic spice tones, rye toast, caraway seed, a beautifully complex base of soil tones and a topnote of dried rose petals. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and beautifully complex, with lovely concentration at the core, refined *mousse*, crisp acids, seamless balance and stunning length and grip on the unrepentantly elegant and dancing finish. Breathtaking balance and grace. 2014-2035+. **97**.

#### **Taittinger (Reims)**

*This was my first visit to the cellars of Taittinger, located on top of the old site of the Abbey de St. Niçaise. I had written a piece a few years ago on Taittinger, which had appeared in one of the special issues that I sent out to subscribers, and in this article, I had written about the ancient Roman galleries under the house that are used to age the Comtes de Champagne bottlings of Taittinger. But, even knowing about these beautiful cellars did not prepare me for the beauty and immense nature of these Romain chalk mines, which had been converted carefully by the monks here into the cellars and galleries that are today used to house maturing bottles of the Taittinger Têtes de Cuvées. The engineering feats of the Romans to craft these mines back in the third or early fourth centuries, and then have them withstand the test of time for the next sixteen centuries is absolutely amazing, and seems to clearly point to a level of sophisticated wisdom in these times that has perhaps not been really improved upon over the ensuing years. During my visit to Taittinger in late March, I was graciously received by Dominique Garréta, the Grande Marque's Communications Director, and we had a lovely tour of these beautiful*

*Roman galleries, prior to settling in for a fine tasting to finish up a long afternoon of tasting in Reims. The house's long-time Cellar Master, Loic Dupont, was not in Reims at the time of my visit, but I do hope to have the pleasure to meet him in person on my next visit to the cellars here. I am happy to report Madame Garréta agreed with me that a vertical tasting of the house's superb new cuvée, Prélude, would be interesting, so on my next trip to Reims, we will finally get to put in practice my theory that this is one of the top non-vintage bottlings for extended cellaring produced in Champagne! On this visit, we tasted four wines during our tasting here, which I have listed first in the tasting notes that follow, and I have appended also here a few more wines tasted with Clovis Taittinger here in New York at the end of last year, as he found time to squeeze in a lunch together during his busy schedule here in the US at the end of October. I have also added a couple of other recent releases from the maison, that were kindly sent to me this summer by Taittinger's long-time US importer, Kobrand. A few other notes on Taittinger wines are also included here, as they were tasted over the last year at various other events.*

### **Taittinger “Brut Réserve” NV (Reims)**

The Taittinger “Brut Réserve” non-vintage bottling is the same as the bottling of Brut “la Française”, but it does not spend quite as long on the lees prior to disgorgement. Look for the “3-D” gold label of this bottling designed to celebrate this summer's World Cup. The wine is a blend of forty percent chardonnay, thirty-five percent pinot noir and twenty-five percent pinot meunier and probably spent around three years on the lees prior to disgorgement. The bouquet is a fine blend of apple, lemon zest, fresh-baked bread, lovely minerality, dried flowers and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and rock solid at the core, with pinpoint bubbles, snappy acids and excellent length and grip on the focused finish. Fine juice. 2014-2025+. **90.**

### **Taittinger “la Française” Brut NV (Reims)**

The new release of La Française is the same *cépages* as the Brut Réserve, but aged between three and a half and four years on the lees prior to disgorgement. The wine shows more aromatic depth and complexity as a result, wafting from the glass in a first class constellation of apple, pear, brioche, fine minerality, smoke, a touch of almond, orange zest and a topnote of white lilies. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and complex, with excellent focus and balance, very refined *mousse*, vibrant acids and great bounce and grip on the long and complex finish. This is not quite as vivid in its fruit presentation as the younger Brut Réserve, but deeper, longer and more complex and is really excellent this year. 2014-2030. **91+.**

### **Taittinger “Prestige Rosé” Brut NV (Reims)**

The new release of the Taittinger non-vintage “Prestige Rosé” is a blend of fifty percent pinot noir, twenty percent pinot meunier and thirty percent chardonnay and is aged three years on the lees prior to disgorgement. The color is a lovely salmon and the wine offers up a bright and classy bouquet of strawberries, tangerine, rye toast, lovely minerality, a touch of clove and a topnote of orange zest. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and beautifully focused, with a fine core, zesty acids, elegant *mousse* and excellent length and grip on the precise, complex and superbly balanced finish. This seems a bit lower in *dosage* than the last several releases and the wine displays great backend mineral drive as a result. Lovely juice. 2014-2025. **91.**

### **Taittinger “Nocturne” Sec NV (Reims)**

The new release of Taittinger's Nocturne Sec bottling is comprised of a blend of forty percent chardonnay, thirty-five percent pinot noir and twenty-five percent pinot meunier, and it



too now shows off a very colorful package. The wine has a slightly higher *dosage* than the new Nocturne Sec Rosé bottling, coming in at eighteen grams per liter. The nose is lovely, wafting from the glass in a mix of peach, apple, musky floral tones, brioche, complex soil nuances and a touch of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and vibrant, with excellent cut and grip to carry its residual sweetness, very refined *mousse*, a fine core and excellent focus and balance on the very long, crisp gently sweet finish. This is a lovely wine. 2014-2020. **90.**

**Taittinger “Nocturne” Rosé Sec NV (Reims)**

The new Taittinger “Nocturne” Rosé Sec bottling is really a lovely wine and I love its festive packaging. The wine is a blend of thirty percent chardonnay, fifty percent pinot noir and twenty percent pinot meunier (the same as the non-vintage Prestige Rosé Brut bottling), but is aged an additional year on the lees (four years versus three) and is finished with a *dosage* of 17.5 grams per liter. The wine offers up a deep and complex bouquet of orange, cherries, woodsmoke, rye bread, lovely soil tones and a bit of cinnamon. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and quite minerally, with excellent acids to carry the residual sweetness, lovely complexity, elegant, pinpoint bubbles and very impressive length and grip on the focused and very classy finish. Given the amount of *dosage* the wine is carrying, the impeccable balance here is very, very impressive, as this wine really does not seem particularly sweet on the backend! Fine juice. 2014-2020+. **91.**



*The amazingly festive new packaging for the two Taittinger Nocturne bottlings, as well as their magical Prélude.*



### **Taittinger Prélude Brut NV (Grand Cru)**

The current release of Prélude from Taittinger has a base wine from the 2006 vintage and is absolutely stunning. The deep, pure and utterly refined nose offers up scents of apple, pear, orange peel, a very complex base of minerality, a nice touch of spice tones and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and beautifully balanced, with a rock solid core, superb focus and grip, elegant *mousse* and a very long, snappy and mineral-driven finish. Lovely juice that is accessible now (like so many wines based on the 2006 vintage), but which will age extremely well. 2014-2035+. **94.**

### **2006 Taittinger Brut Millésimé**

The 2006 Taittinger Brut Millésimé is very much emblematic of what I have come to expect with the 2006 vintage in Champagne, as this wine is wide open and offers up superb drinking right out of the blocks. The very fine bouquet wafts from the glass in a ripe mix of apple, pear, brioche, plenty of smoky overtones, a fine base of soil and a topnote of citrus peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with fine mid-palate intensity, frothy *mousse*, crisp acids and fine focus and balance on the long and broad-shouldered finish. By the standards of this fine vintage bottling, the 2006 will probably not make old bones, but it will be a crowd pleaser over the next decade and a half or so! 2014-2030+. **93.**

### **Taittinger Folies de la Marquetterie Brut NV (Pierry)**

With each passing vintage, Taittinger's Folies de la Marquetterie gets more and more interesting to my palate. The most recent release is a blend of fifty-five percent pinot noir and forty-five percent chardonnay, with fifty percent of the base wines raised in older oak *foudres*. The bouquet is really lovely, offering up an aromatic constellation of apple, toasted bread, a nice touch of nuttiness, smoke and a fine, complex base of soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite suave on the attack, with a fine core of fruit, lovely acidity and *mousse*, superb balance and impressive length and grip on the complex and very well-focused finish. Fine juice, and a wine that really should be more sought after by Champagne connoisseurs in the market. 2014-2030+. **93.**

### **2005 Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs Brut**

The 2005 Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs is a superb wine in the making, and this vintage looks likely to have produced a more broad-shouldered rendition of this iconic bottling. The beautiful bouquet is a mix of pear, delicious apples, a touch of tangerine, *pain grillé*, lovely, chalky minerality, smoke and a vibrant topnotes of both lemon zest and lemon blossoms. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and complex, with a warm vintage generosity to the attack, a great core of fruit, excellent structure and focus, pinpoint bubbles and superb length and grip on the focused and perfectly poised vintage. I suspect that this wine will age very much along the lines of the lovely 1989 Comtes de Champagne. 2017-2040+. **95+.**

### **2002 Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs Brut**

I seem to be destined to cross paths with a bottle of the 2002 Comtes de Champagne every six months or so, which is probably not often enough for this magical wine, but is not too bad an average! This most recent bottle was tasted with Clovis Taittinger during his visit to New York at the end of October for the Wine Experience, as we had the pleasure to share a lunch together on that trip. The wine is clearly one of the greatest young vintages of Comtes de Champagne that I have ever had the pleasure to taste, and it gets incrementally better each time I taste it, soaring from the glass in a stunning aromatic mélange of apple, pear, gentle notes of the *crème patissière* to come, beautifully complex, chalky minerality, brioche, white flowers and a

smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and laser-like in its focus, with a rock solid core, flawless balance, very refined *mousse* and brilliant length and grip on the seamless and powerful finish. A brilliant Comtes! 2013-2040+. **98.**

#### **1990 Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs Brut**

1990 has not proven to be my favorite Champagne vintage from this era, as it has aged a bit more briskly than one would have imagined early on and now clearly seems to have been eclipsed by both 1988 and 1989. However, the 1990 Comtes de Champagne is a beautiful bottle of wine that is still at its apogee and drinking with great style, despite the relative limitations of this hot vintage. The bouquet is deep, full mature and tertiary in its complexity, wafting from the glass in notes of apple, pear, a bit of nutmeg, brioche, complex, chalky minerality, toasted almonds, orange zest and plenty of smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and still *à point*, with fine *mousse*, crisp acids and fine length and grip on the mature, but still vibrant finish. This is one of the finest examples of the 1990 vintage that I have crossed paths with in quite some time. 2014-2030. **95.**

#### **2002 Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Brut Rosé**

The 2002 Comtes de Champagne Rosé is a stellar example of the vintage, soaring from the glass in a pure aromatic constellation of blood orange, cherries, wheat bread, a touch of caraway seed, orange zest, beautifully complex, limestone minerality and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and still quite youthful in its profile, with a rock solid core, crisp acids, outstanding focus and grip, elegant, frothy *mousse* and exceptional balance and length on the pure and still fairly primary finish. Am I just drinking this wine while it is still too young? 2014-2035. **95.**

#### **2000 Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Brut Rosé**

The 2000 Comtes de Champagne Rosé is drinking beautifully as it crosses the threshold into its fourteenth year, offering up a deep and very vibrant nose of white cherries, blood orange, rye toast, a beautifully complex base of chalky minerality, smoke and citrus peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and perfectly focused, with very elegant *mousse*, a fine core, superb soil signature and great balance and grip on the very, very long, seamless and electric finish. I think I have a very, very slight preference for the brilliant 2000 to the 2002 Comtes Rosé- both were tasted within a week of each other- a very good week I might add! 2014-2030. **96.**

#### **Bruno Paillard (Reims)**

*This was my first visit to Champagne Bruno Paillard in Reims, whose wines I have admired for many years. I spent several enjoyable hours here with Alice Paillard and her US Brand Manager, François Colas, tasting through a range of simply outstanding wines. To my mind, Champagne Bruno Paillard is one of the great, undiscovered gems in the entire region, and I continue to be absolutely mystified how wines this stunning can remain relatively under the radar in so many markets around the globe. I often think that there is a very real family resemblance here between the Paillard wines and those of Krug, and that these wines should be studiously collected in any well-stocked cellar and available on more top wine lists around the globe, as they are truly exceptional examples of Champagne. The house is very young, having only been started by Bruno Paillard in 1981, at the age of twenty-seven and on the slimmest of shoe string budgets. Monsieur Paillard hailed from a family that long worked as grape brokers in the region, so he was not new to the Champagne business by any stretch of the imagination, but his desire to hand-craft his own wines overruled business prudence and he set out on his own*

*in 1981. Some of the similarities with Joseph Krug's own story are notable. The earliest Paillard wines were made entirely from purchased grapes (in rented cellar space), with Bruno Paillard purchasing his first parcel of vines in 1990- three hectares in the grand cru village of Oger in the Côte des Blancs. Today, the domaine owns thirty-two hectares of vineyards, which is enough to cover half of their production needs, with the remaining fifty percent of the grapes still purchased from the very first growers Monsieur Paillard began working with at the start of the 1980s. Of the thirty-two hectares of vineyards that the family owns today, fully twelve hectares are in top grand cru villages, which include, in addition to the aforementioned three hectares in Oger, parcels in Mesnil-sur-Oger, Bouzy, Ambonnay and Verzenay. The house of Bruno Paillard began to gain some momentum in the market in the latter half of the 1980s, as the quality of the wines here was exemplary from the start, and today, it is one of the modern success stories in Reims. Monsieur Paillard was joined in 2007 by his daughter, Alice Paillard, and she has literally learned the business from the ground up since her arrival. Her first year was spent exclusively focused on the vineyards and cellars, followed by a year developing export markets, and since 2009 she has been Co-Director of the house with her father. The house produces between 400,000 and half a million bottles each year from their modern winery, located outside of the center of Reims on the main road to Épernay.*

*Champagne Bruno Paillard practices sustainable viticulture in their vineyards, eschewing chemical herbicides and using organic products whenever possible, and they are clearly on the forefront of enlightened vineyard husbandry in the region. I have not yet had a chance to visit any of their vineyard parcels, but hope to have that opportunity in the near future. The vins de clairs here are fermented and aged in either older oak barrels or stainless steel tanks, depending on the vineyard source or the style of the vintage, but there is a notable barrel-fermented character to the wines that recalls (again) the house of Krug a bit to my palate, as the wines are clearly built for the cellar and reward aging remarkably well. Sixty percent of the house's production is in their flagship, non-vintage bottling called "Première Cuvée", which is typically aged three years on the lees and then spend an additional four months post disgorgement in the cellars, prior to release. The cépages is typically forty-five percent pinot noir, thirty-three percent chardonnay and twenty-two percent pinot meunier for this wine, with reserve wines making up anywhere from twenty to fifty percent of the blend in any given year, and we had the pleasure to taste several older examples during my visit. I had long hypothesized that this bottling would age very, very well, but being short on will power, I had never allowed any of my bottles to last more than a year or two in the cellar before the urge for immediate gratification outweighed my research predilections. Happily, the house has just started a program to offer mixed cases of older Première Cuvée bottlings, so that one can either buy the three pack with the most recent release, with an example disgorged three years earlier and a third bottle, disgorged six years previously. For those more curious, there is a five bottle collection that also includes bottles disgorged eight years prior to the most recent bottling and one disgorged ten years earlier. The five bottle set would make a brilliant tasting!*

*Additionally to the superb Première Cuvée non-vintage Brut (or again, in true Krug fashion, this wine is referred to by the family as a multi-vintage blend), Champagne Bruno Paillard also produces a non-vintage bottling of Première Cuvée Brut Rosé, a non-vintage Blanc de Blancs Brut titled "Réserve Privé", a Brut Millésime "Assemblage", a vintage-dated Blanc de Blancs, and a small amount of their Tête de Cuvée, called "N.P.U" (for Nec Plus Ultra). The*

*labels for the vintage-dated bottlings are adorned each vintage in which they are produced with a different painting, commissioned to one of Europe's finest artists, in much the same way as Mouton-Rothschild's labels have a different artist's rendition on the label. However, the Paillards ask the painter to try and create a work that captures the style and personality of the vintage in question, which is described to them by the family prior to their commission. The house style is for quite low dosage for Brut bottlings, with six grams per liter typical for the Première Cuvée and only five grams per liter for their Réserve Privé Blanc de Blancs. Champagne Bruno Paillard is also to be commended for being one of the very first Grandes Marques to print the date of disgorgement on their back labels, as they have been doing this since 1985! Naturally, since this information is always of interest to me, I forgot to check the back label during our tasting of the non-vintage Blanc de Blancs with which we started out! The house of Bruno Paillard is currently at the top of its game and making absolutely exquisite wines that offer up stunning value in the world of Champagne, and I cannot recommend these wines highly enough. Inevitably, one day the superb quality of these wines is going to become better known and prices will rise, so I implore readers who love great Champagne to seek some Bruno Paillard out now and lay those bottles down in the cellar, for future glory awaits each and every bottle that wears the Bruno Paillard label.*

### **Bruno Paillard “Réserve Privé” Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Brut NV**

The Paillard family disgorges bottles of their Réserve Privé Blanc de Blancs two times each year, roughly six months apart, after four years of aging on the lees (about a year longer normally than the Première Cuvée). Although I did not write down the disgorgement date of this bottling, it is base year 2007, which would probably mean that it was disgorged on one of the two occasions that the house was doing this during 2012. The *dosage* this year was five grams per liter. The wine is absolutely lovely, offering up a deep and youthful nose of pear, delicious apples, lemon blossoms, chalky minerality and a gentle topnote of smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and very minerally in personality, with a fine core, elegant *mousse* and great cut and grip on the long and beautifully balanced finish. This still needs three or four years to really blossom and develop some of its secondary layers of complexity, but it will be a stellar bottle with a bit of patience. 2017-2040. **93.**

### **Bruno Paillard “Première Cuvée” Brut NV (Disgorged October 2013)**

The youngest rendition of Première Cuvée that I tasted on my visit to the maison in late March is comprised of twenty percent barrel-fermented base wines this year and carries a *dosage* of six grams per liter. The wine is young, but very promising and shows a nice influence from its pinot meunier constituent in its complex bouquet of apple, tart orange, a very complex base of soil tones, meunier-induced, gentle floral tones, warm bread and a dollop of smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and nascently complex, with excellent mid-palate intensity, elegant *mousse*, excellent focus and a very long, well-balanced and primary finish. This is going to be excellent (and is already very tasty), but I would be strongly inclined to give it a couple of years, as there are layers of complexity still to unlock with bottle age (as the subsequent examples so graphically illustrated). 2014-2040+. **93.**

### **Bruno Paillard “Première Cuvée” Brut NV (Disgorged May 2007)**

This bottle of Bruno Paillard, disgorged in May of 2007, included thirty percent reserve wines and had a slightly higher *dosage* of eight grams per liter back in those days. The wine is absolutely superb, wafting from the glass in a complex and classy mélange of apple, pear, a touch of almond, marvelously complex soil tones, a bit of white chocolate, candied orange peel,

ginger and hints of honey. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and round and generous on the attack, with a rock solid core, fine acids, frothy *mousse* and stellar length and grip on the complex and absolutely *à point* finish. Exhibit A of how well this bottling ages! 2014-2030+. **94.**  
**Bruno Paillard “Première Cuvée” Brut NV (Disgorged February 2001)**

The example of Première Cuvée that I tasted with a disgorgement date of February 2001 (making this primarily base year 1997) is absolutely superb. The color is just showing a touch of gold to its hue in the glass and offers up a pure and tertiary nose of baked apples and pears, honeyed almonds, lovely soil tones, citrus peel and brioche. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and at its apogee of peak drinkability, with a superb core, excellent, pinpoint bubbles, lovely acids and very fine length and grip on the complex and beautifully balanced finish. Great juice and a very compelling argument for letting the wines of Bruno Paillard blossom with bottle age. 2014-2030+. **94+.**

**Bruno Paillard “Première Cuvée” Brut Rosé NV (Disgorged June 2013)**

Bruno Paillard makes one of the palest Brut Rosés out there, with just a touch of peachy blush to its hue. It is comprised of a blend of primarily pinot noir, with a touch of chardonnay added and spends three years on the lees prior to disgorgement. The current release of the non-vintage Première Cuvée Brut Rosé is outstanding, wafting from the glass in a complex aromatic constellation of tangerine, blood orange, chalky soil tones, smoke, rye toast and a touch of stoniness. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and shows off excellent mid-palate depth, with a great core of fruit, superb focus and balance, vibrant acids, elegant *mousse* and a long, complex and seamless finish. Fine, fine juice. 2014-2030+. **94.**

**2004 Bruno Paillard “Assemblage” Brut Millésime**

The 2004 Bruno Paillard “Assemblage” Brut Millésime is a blend of fifty-two percent pinot noir and forty-eight percent chardonnay and spent nine years in the cellars aging on its lees prior to disgorgement. The wine is outstanding, offering up a gently nutty bouquet of apple, fresh apricot, salty soil tones, an exotic touch of lychee nut, brioche and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with a rock solid core, pinpoint bubbles, superb focus and grip and a very long, elegant and utterly refined finish. A superb example of the 2004 vintage and a wine I could drink anytime, anyplace! 2015-2040+. **94+.**

**1996 Bruno Paillard “Blanc de Blancs” Brut Millésime (Disgorged July 2007)**

The 1996 Bruno Paillard Blanc de Blancs spent nine years aging on its lees prior to disgorgement and had been in my friend’s cellar since 2009. This is a beautifully complex and *à point* example of the vintage, wafting from the glass in a superb blend of pear, apple, deep nutty tones, a beautiful base of soil, gentle notes of *crème patissière*, gentle leesiness and a topnote of citrus peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and absolutely rock solid at the core, with lovely complexity, refined *mousse* and superb length and grip on the focused and very classy finish. Lovely juice that has now entered its apogee of peak drinkability, but will last for decades and still has plenty of chapters left. 2013-2035. **94+.**

**1999 Bruno Paillard “N.P.U” Brut**

This was the first vintage of the Bruno Paillard “Nec Plus Ultra” *Tête de Cuvée* that I had ever had the pleasure to taste and the wine is absolutely stellar. The wine is made entirely from grand cru vineyards owned by the Paillard family, and in 1999, they utilized fruit from Mesnil-sur-Oger, Oger, Bouzy and Verzenay for this cuvée, with the *cépages* a fifty-fifty blend of chardonnay and pinot noir and the wine spending fully twelve years on its lees prior to disgorgement. The wine offers up a beautiful bouquet of apple, brioche, pear, a very complex base of chalky soil, hazelnuts and fresh almonds. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied,

crisp and complex, with a superb core, great focus and grip, refined *mousse* and a very long, perfectly balanced and utterly refined finish. A great, great wine. 2014-2035+. **95+**.



*Co-Director of Champagne Bruno Paillard, Alice Paillard, with one of her favorite paintings for their vintages.*

### **Billecart-Salmon (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ)**

*This was my first visit to the cellars of Billecart-Salmon in Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, and I was delighted to have a full tour of the cuverie and cellars and then a fine tasting of this house's exceptional wines. I was surprised to learn that over the last several years, Billecart has begun to incorporate some barrel-fermented vins clairs into their various cuvées, so that now most bottlings include approximately five percent barrel-fermented wines in the blend, with some of the vintage wines now going as high as twenty percent barrel-fermented juice in the blends. Of course, the maison would be using a bit of wood for their new bottling of non-vintage "Sous Bois" Brut, but I was unaware prior to this visit that a bit of barrel fermentation is now being used for the entire range. Interestingly, the base wines that are barrel-fermented only go through their alcoholic fermentations in barrel, and are then removed prior to going through malo in barrel. I assume this is to minimize the impact of the wood on the vins clairs, and certainly, none of the recent releases that I have tasted have shown any signs of oakiness, other than the gentle base of oak found in the Sous Bois bottling- which is amazingly subtle and well-done I might add! The house has a wonderful sense of continuity, as its Chef de Cave, François Domi, has been with the house nearly thirty years and their Chef de Viticulture, Denis Blée, has been in*

*charge of the vineyards here for two decades. Today, Billecart-Salmon owns one hundred hectares of its own vines, which is enough to cover just under half its needs for its annual production of two million bottles per annum. I did not write the dates of disgorgement for every bottling that we tasted on this visit (sloppy of me), but I have included that date when I did remember to ask and wrote down the response. Billecart is making superb wines today, which is no news to fans of this fine house, as this has been the case probably since the day the family opened its doors in 1881.*

### **Billecart-Salmon Extra Brut NV**

The Billecart-Salmon Extra Brut non-vintage bottling is comprised of a blend of forty percent pinot meunier, thirty-five percent pinot noir and twenty-five percent chardonnay and has a *dosage* of zero. This is really a lovely example of Extra Brut, as it offers up lovely balance and accessibility right out of the blocks to go along with its very dry personality. The superb bouquet wafts from the glass in a mix of grapefruit, complex minerality, gentle notes of bread dough, lemon peel, a touch of smokiness and a pungently floral topnote from the pinot meunier component in the blend. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and very elegant, with affine core, ripe acids, elegant *mousse* and excellent length and grip on the focused and complex finish. Lovely juice. 2014-2030+. **92.**

### **Billecart-Salmon Brut Réserve NV**

The Brut Réserve bottling from Billecart-Salmon is identical in *cépages* to the Extra Brut, with the sole differences in the wines being that the Brut Réserve receives a judicious *dosage* of seven grams per liter. Not surprisingly, the current release is excellent, offering a complex nose of pear, warm biscuits, a fine base of complex soil tones, gentle notes of lime peel and a nice touch of white roses in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, complex and very refined in profile, with a lovely core, pinpoint bubbles, bright, well-integrated acids and a very long, tangy and elegant finish. I have had some previous renditions of Brut Réserve that seemed a bit bound up by their structural elements out of the blocks and in need of some bottle age to blossom, but the current release will drink beautifully right from the outset. 2014-2035. **92.**

### **Billecart-Salmon Brut Réserve NV (2008 Release)**

This particular bottle of Brut Réserve had been in my cellar since 2008, and it has aged beautifully and was drinking very well when opened this past spring. The excellent nose wafts from the glass in a mélange of apple, peach, warm bread, a touch of ginger, a lovely base of soil and plenty of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and still rock solid at the core, with fine *mousse*, bright acids and lovely length and grip on the wide open, complex and classy finish. This particular release of Brut Réserve had been particularly steely out of the blocks, which is why I tucked some away to see how it evolved with bottle age. Yet again, a pretty strong argument for treating non-vintage Brut bottlings like other fine wines and cellar them for some time before starting to drink them! 2014-2025. **92.**

### **Billecart-Salmon Brut Rosé NV (Disgorged September 2013)**

Billecart-Salmon is probably most famous for their excellent bottling of non-vintage Brut Rosé, and the new bottling is another superb wine. The *cépages* is comprised of forty percent chardonnay, twenty percent pinot meunier and thirty-five percent pinot noir, with eight percent of the pinot noir included as still wine to give this wine its lovely, pale salmon color. The *dosage* is slightly higher here, but still judicious at nine grams per liter. The bouquet is pure and vibrant, wafting from the glass in a mix of tangerine, almonds, smoke, lovely minerality, wheat toast and



dried flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and very focused, with a fine core, racy, zesty acids and great cut and grip on the long and beautifully balanced finish. 2014-2025. **92.**

#### **2006 Billecart-Salmon Vintage Extra Brut**

Billecart-Salmon has been producing their Millésime bottlings as Extra Brut since the 2000 vintage. The 2006, which is comprised of a blend of seventy-five percent pinot noir and twenty-five percent chardonnay was twenty percent barrel fermented in this vintage, and received a very modest *dosage* of three grams per liter. The wine is very fine, offering up a bright and classy bouquet of baked peaches and apples, *pain grillé*, almonds, a touch of citrus peel, lovely minerality and a nice dollop of fresh-baked bread in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and rock solid at the core, with refined *mousse*, bright acids and fine length and grip on the wide open and classy finish. Fine juice, and like a lot of 2006s, it is already drinking very well indeed. 2014-2035. **92+.**

#### **1999 Billecart-Salmon “Cuvée Nicolas François Billecart” Brut (Disgorged Dec. 2012)**

The Cuvée Nicolas François Billecart is produced solely from fruit from grand cru-ranked villages, with the 1999 vintage hailing from a blend of sixty percent pinot noir and forty percent chardonnay. The *dosage* this year is a very low five grams per liter and twenty percent of the *vins clairs* for this wine were barrel-fermented. The bouquet is deep, classy and quite concentrated, as it delivers a superb mélange of apple, tangerine, toasted nuts, a superb base of soil, smoky overtones and a gentle touch of leesiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and has real weight and authority of flavor in the mid-palate, with crisp acids, utterly refined *mousse*, excellent complexity and a very long, well-balanced and classy finish. The wine is currently wide open structurally and drinking with great style, and yet one can sense that it is still a very young wine and more complexity will emerge if one has the patience to defer gratification for a bit and leave the wine in the cellar for more bottle age. 2014-2035+. **94+.**

#### **1996 Billecart-Salmon Vintage Blanc de Blancs Brut**

The 1996 Blanc de Blancs from Billecart-Salmon is a stunning wine that is just reaching its apogee of peak drinkability, but will cruise along at a great level for at least another couple of decades. The superb bouquet delivers a mélange of apple, sweet brioche, lemon chiffon, almond skin, a beautifully complex base of soil and a gentle touch of honeycomb in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and beautifully balanced, with a lovely core, fine focus and grip, pinpoint bubbles and great length and grip on the pure and very elegant finish. Great juice. 2013-2035. **95.**

#### **2002 Billecart-Salmon “Cuvée Elisabeth Salmon” Brut Rosé**

The 2002 Billecart-Salmon “Cuvée Elisabeth Salmon” Brut Rosé is an absolutely brilliant wine. The *cépages* here in 2002 is a fifty-fifty blend of chardonnay and pinot noir, with eight percent of the pinot being comprised of still red wine. The *dosage* is again only five grams per liter. This is a breathtakingly beautiful bottle of Brut Rosé, soaring from the glass in a blend of blood orange, white cherries, wheat toast, exotic spices redolent of both cumin and saffron, a gorgeously complex base of soil and a gentle topnote of citrus zest. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and very pure on the attack, with perfect focus and balance, a great core, stunning elegance and poise, refined *mousse* and a very long, zesty and utterly seamless finish. As hard as it will be to resist this wine, I would try to give it at least a couple more years’ worth of bottle age to allow its secondary layers of complexity to more fully emerge. Absolutely stellar juice. 2016-2040. **96.**

### **Philipponnat (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ)**

*This was my first visit to the lovely offices and cellars of Philipponnat in the village of Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, which lie looking out at the Marne River and just a very, short walk from the fabled vineyard of Clos des Goisses. I was fortunate to be hosted during my visit by Antoine de Boysson, who is the Commercial Director for export markets for Philipponnat. The house was founded in 1910 by Pierre Philipponnat and in 1935, the family had the good sense to buy the iconic five and a half hectare vineyard of Clos des Goisses, that is just a stone's throw down the street from the cellars. Clos des Goisses is a brilliantly-situated vineyard, overlooking the Marne River that lies just across the street, with the heart of the vineyard a very steep slope facing directly south across the river. The soils here are a very thin layer of loam over a profound foundation of limestone, and the vineyard is planted to seventy percent pinot noir and thirty percent chardonnay. While the majority of Clos des Goisses is comprised of that filet section of steep, south-facing hillside, there are also other sections of the vineyard that are a bit flatter at the top of the slope, and not all are oriented directly due south either. While I imagine that this was considered a demerit thirty years ago, today, with the advent of global warming, it is probably a very good thing to have these sections of the Clos that do not ripen with quite the same exuberance as the heart of the slope, as in warmer vintages, they can serve to give the Clos des Goisses bottling more cut and mineral spine than the section that is so beautifully-situated with its due southerly exposition. Philipponnat's Clos des Goisses is clearly one of the greatest cuvées of Champagne produced in the region, but I have found that the entire range at this small house has been exemplary over the least eight to ten years, and there is not a wine produced at the maison that is a weak link in their lineup. I particularly like the Cuvée 1522 bottlings offered by Philipponnat, which are made primarily from some of the top vineyards that the house owns itself outside of the Clos des Goisses, and then augmented with a small percentage of top quality fruit that is purchased. The vins clairs for these bottlings are often barrel-fermented, and they make a very classy complement to the Clos des Goisses. Philipponnat has also taken the very laudable step of adding more background information on their non-vintage bottlings to their back labels in recent years, including the date of disgorgement and the year of the base wine in the blend. The house has expanded their stocks of reserve wines for their non-vintage bottlings over recent years as well and keeps them in old oak casks in the cellars, in a solera system that adds new additions to the base reserve wine from each designation and varietal, allowing for complexity to build without losing brightness and mineral drive in these wines that are destined to add depth and dimension to the base cuvées at the maison. And in fact, Philipponnat's non-vintage wines are amongst the finest to be found in the market these days, and are a huge leap upwards in quality from these same bottlings that I knew in my early wine merchant days, with lovely cut, soil signature and complexity that would have been unimaginable from these wines in the late 1980s or early 1990s. This house is on quite a roll at the moment, with the entire range of exemplary quality, and a few new cuvées in the works that are going to be very exciting when they are released in a few years' time.*

### **Philipponnat Brut Royale Réserve NV**

The current release of the Brut Royale Réserve from Philipponnat is comprised of a blend of sixty-five percent pinot noir, thirty percent chardonnay and five percent pinot meunier, with the blend including thirty-seven percent reserve wines. The *dosage* on this lovely Brut NV is eight grams per liter, and the wine offers up a fine bouquet of apple, bread fruit, a lovely base of chalky soil tones, fresh-baked bread and orange peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied,

complex, with a fine core, frothy *mousse*, crisp acids and impressive length and grip on the well-balanced finish. A fine example. 2014-2030. **90.**

**Philipponnat “Non-Dosé” Royale Réserve NV (Disgorged February 2013)**

I was remiss in not noting the date of disgorgement and the base year of the wine above, but did get my act together to do so for the new release of “Non-Dosé” Royale Réserve, which hails primarily from the 2007 vintage, incorporates twenty-eight percent of reserve wines in the blend and was disgorged in February of 2013. The wine is excellent, offering up a vibrant nose of brad fruit, smoke, stony soil tones, a nice touch of salinity and grapefruit peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, bright and racy, with a good core, fine focus and grip, but the finish seems just a whisper shorter than the straight Brut version of this wine. A very good bottle, but I have a slight preference for the above this year. 2014-2025. **89+.**

**Philipponnat “Non-Dosé” Royale Réserve NV (Disgorged February 2012)**

I had a chance to enjoy the previous rendition of Philipponnat’s “Non-Dosé” Royale Réserve at the start of a vertical Barolo tasting in January of this year, and either the base year of 2006 was a touch stronger for this wine, or the additional years’ worth of bottle age has allowed the wine to blossom and really come into its own- which may well mean that I am simply underestimating the new release that I tasted in Mareuil-sur-Aÿ in March. The bouquet offers up an excellent blend of apple, tart orange, bread dough, lovely minerality, smoke and a topnote of caraway seed. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and elegant on the attack, with lovely mid-palate depth, crisp acids, elegant *mousse* and lovely balance and grip on the long and complex finish. 2014-2030. **91.**

**Philipponnat Réserve Rosée NV (Disgorged September 2013)**

I really like Philipponnat’s Rosés these days, and their current release of Réserve Rosée is excellent. The wine is made of a blend of seventy-five percent pinot noir, twenty percent chardonnay and five percent pinot meunier, with seven percent of the pinot noir being still red wine to give the bottle its delicate salmon color. The *dosage* this year was nine grams per liter. The bouquet jumps from the glass in a young and vibrant mix of melon, orange peel, chalky minerality, bread dough and a nice touch of spices in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp and still youthfully snappy, with a full-bodied and nascently complex personality that reveals a good core, elegant *mousse* and fine length and grip on the seamless finish. I would try to give this wine another year in the cellar to really let it blossom from behind its girdle of acidity, but the acids are so well-integrated into the body of the wine that it is certainly approachable today. 2015-2025+. **92.**

**2006 Philipponnat Grande Blanc Brut**

Somehow, I managed to miss the date of disgorgement of the 2006 Grande Blanc, but at least I did not miss its quality during our tasting at the maison in late March! The wine is a bit more open on both the nose and palate than its 2005 counterpart and offers up lovely drinking right out of the blocks, wafting from the glass in a mélange of brioche, pear, tangerine, a nice touch of nuttiness, citrus peel and a fine base of chalky minerality. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and snappy, with a fairly powerful personality, fine mid-palate concentration, elegant *mousse* and very good length and grip on the strong finish. A very good bottle that will drink well right out of the gates. 2014-2030. **90.**

**2005 Philipponnat Grande Blanc Brut (Disgorged April 2013)**

The 2005 Grande Blanc is another excellent wine, with great precision on both the nose and palate and perhaps a bit more nascent complexity than the fine 2006 rendition. This vintage of Grande Blanc has a *dosage* of five grams per liter, so this is another bottling labeled as Brut

that could have been sold as Extra Brut if the house deemed this desirable. The bouquet is deep and very pretty in its constellation of lemon, delicious apples, chalky minerality, brioche, a touch of white flowers and a topnote of citrus peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and youthfully complex, with a rock solid core, frothy *mousse*, fine focus and excellent length and grip on the very well-balanced and classy finish. High quality juice. 2017-2035+. **92.**

#### **1982 Philipponnat Grande Blanc Brut**

The 1982 Grande Blanc hails from an era at Philipponnat where the wines were not quite as strong across the board as they are today, but this only augurs that much the better for the 2005 and 2006 versions that are on the market now! The deep and beautifully mature nose offers up scents of buttered walnuts, dried peaches and apricots, chalky minerality, smoky overtones and citrus peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and gently nutty on the attack, but still with superb, vigorous *mousse*, lovely focus and complexity, a fine girdle of acidity and really impressive length and grip on the classy finish. This is fully mature, but in a very nice place for current drinking and still has plenty of life in it. 2014-2025. **91.**

#### **2003 Philipponnat Réserve Millésime Brut**

I have had some surprisingly fine 2003 vintage-dated Champagnes in the last several months, and Philipponnat's '03 Réserve Millésime is excellent. This bottling is comprised entirely from pinot noir and has a *dosage* of four or five grams per liter. The deep and vibrant nose jumps from the glass in a blend of warm bread, buttered almonds, apples, citrus zest, smoke and a complex base of minerality. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and very well-balanced, with a light on its feet personality, excellent, pinpoint bubbles and a very long, well-balanced and classy finish. A very impressive bottle that is drinking great out of the blocks, but is built to age. 2014-2035. **92.**

#### **2004 Philipponnat “Cuvée 1522” Grand Cru Brut (Disgorged March 2013)**

The Cuvée 1522 bottlings are named for the year when records show the first Philipponnat family member registered for owning vines in the region. These are intended to complement the Clos des Goisses bottling, focusing up more on finesse and elegance, in contrast to the overt intensity of the Clos des Goisses. The 2004 hails from seventy percent house-owned vineyards (primarily pinot noir), augmented with thirty percent chardonnay from top villages in the Côte des Blancs and has a *dosage* of five grams per liter. The wine is excellent, jumping from the glass in a youthful mélange of quince, apple, bread dough, a very complex base of soil and a nice topnote of smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and utterly refined, with a rock solid core, elegant *mousse*, fine focus and balance and a very long, pure and dancing finish. A beautiful wine. 2014-2040. **93.**

#### **2006 Philipponnat “Cuvée 1522” Grand Cru Brut Rosé**

The 2006 Philipponnat “Cuvée 1522” Grand Cru Brut Rosé spent six years on the lees and is made from a *cépages* of sixty-five percent pinot noir and thirty-five percent chardonnay. The wine spent six years aging on its lees and its *dosage* is also five grams per liter, again, making this in reality an Extra Brut bottling. This is a great wine, delivering a deep and vibrant bouquet of strawberries, orange zest, plenty of smokiness, a beautiful base of chalky soil tones, wheat toast and a gentle topnote of citrus peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very suave on the attack, with fine mid-palate concentration, frothy *mousse* and great complexity and grip on the very, very long and supremely elegant finish. *Chapeau!* 2014-2035. **94.**

#### **2006 Philipponnat “Mareuil Pinot Noir Lot 12/204” Brut**

I did not get as much information about this bottling as I would have liked (or failed to write it down concisely in my notebook. This wine is made from a selection of the house's oldest

vines in the village of Mareuil, outside of the Clos des Goisses, and offers up a stunning bouquet of white cherries, tart orange, smoke, wheat bread dough, dried flowers and a stunningly complex base of chalky soil. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and supremely elegant, with a lovely core, frothy *mousse*, beautiful balance and grip and a very, very long, refined and dancing finish. A beautiful wine in the making. 2018-2040+. **95-97.**



#### **2004 Philipponnat Clos des Goisses Brut (Disgorged November 2013)**

The 2004 Clos des Goisses is going to be a wonderful follow-up to the sublime 2002. The wine was aged primarily in old oak casks, did not go through malolactic fermentation and received a *dosage* of 4.5 grams per liter in the racy 2004 vintage. The deep and utterly beautiful bouquet delivers a youthfully complex mélange of apple, tart orange, hard limestone minerality, citrus peel, fresh-baked bread and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with great purity on the attack, laser-like focus, frothy *mousse* and stunning backend mineral drive on the very, very long, snappy and still very primary finish. I really like the faint touch of 2004's youthful *herbacité* here that augurs extremely well for the ultimate complexity of this young and very complete wine. All this beauty needs is time. 2020-2060. **95+.**

#### **2000 Philipponnat Clos des Goisses Brut**

The 2000 Clos des Goisses is still a very young wine and in need of more time in the cellar, but it is a great vintage for this iconic wine. The deep and pure bouquet is just beginning

to stir and show the first signs of its secondary layers of complexity, offering up scents of apple, pear, smoke, brioche, complex, chalky minerality, orange peel and a touch of iodine in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very transparent down to its limestone minerality, with great mid-palate depth, bracing acids, elegant *mousse* and a very, very long, focused and powerful finish that closes with great grip and cut. This great wine still needs to sleep for a handful more years. 2020-2060. 96+.

### **Champagne Charles Heidsieck (Reims)**

*I have been an admirer of the superb and utterly refined wines of Charles Heidsieck for many, many years, and in my book, this is clearly one of the greatest of the Grandes Marques. I was very happy to arrange an appointment here, as my week in Champagne also coincided with the huge wine trade fair of Prowein in Düsseldorf, and a great many Champagne houses had dispatched key managers to greet clients at that superb event. As Germany is the second largest market in the world, after France, for Champagne, I fully understood that many members of the houses' teams would be in Düsseldorf at the time of my visit and was quite grateful that I was able to make an appointment to visit at Charles Heidsieck. Happily, I was able to augment my lovely visit to the house's cellars and tasting room in Reims with a follow-up tasting with the maison's Chef de Cave, Thierry Rosset, during his visit to New York in early June. Monsieur Rosset has been with Charles Heidsieck since 1988, first working alongside the house's long-tenured winemaker, Daniel Thibault (who started here in 1976) and then succeeding Régis Camus as the Chef de Cave here several years ago, when Monsieur Camus moved over to Piper-Heidsieck to reinvigorate that important house. Charles Heidsieck is renowned for using a high percentage of reserve wines in their non-vintage Brut bottlings, up to forty percent each year, as well as aging the wines on their lees far beyond the minimum period in the region (at least three years for their Brut Réserve- the required period is fifteen months!), and Monsieur Rosset likes to say that when it comes to their Brut Réserve bottling, "we use the four noble varieties in Champagne in the cépages of this cuvée- chardonnay, pinot noir, pinot meunier and time."*

*Champagne Charles Heidsieck was founded in 1851 by a young Charles Heidsieck, who wished to have his own maison, rather than try to find a spot in the family house of Heidsieck & Company (which is today's Piper-Heidsieck), that had been founded by his great uncle in 1785. Charles Heidsieck was only twenty-nine when he founded his eponymous maison, purchasing the deep, chalk galleries in Reims that date back to the eleventh century and still serve as the main cellars for the house to this day, rather than seeking out vineyards on which to start the firm. From the very outset, the house has been content to source grapes from top growers across the vignobles of Champagne, and concentrate on the making, blending and long aging of the wines prior to release. This predilection continues to this day, as the maison only owns enough vineyards to supply five percent of their production needs and continues to rely on long-term contracts from independent vignerons. These galleries are indeed some of the most remarkable cellars I have ever seen, based on Roman chalk quarries that were used to build much of ancient Reims, and which are deep, immense and pyramidal in shape (to protect the Roman miners from cave-ins when they were original excavated nearly two thousand years ago), with ceilings forty to fifty feet above the floors and they offer up magical storage environment for Champagne. There are more than three miles of these ancient chalk cellars in total owned by Charles Heidsieck, which are known as "les Crayères" by the Champenois. In this section of Reims, on the southwestern side of the city center in the direction of the main road out of town towards*



*Épernay, one also finds Taittinger, Pommery & Greno and Veuve Clicquot, and these are the only four Champagne houses to own cellars constructed from these Roman “les Crayères”. I took a great many photos of these dark and magnificent galleries, but sadly, my camera was not adequate to the task and I will have to return with better equipment if I am to do justice to their immense beauty in photographs.*

*Charles Heidsieck makes its two non-vintage flagship bottlings of Brut Réserve and Rosé Réserve from equal parts of chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier, with the Rosé’s primary difference being that five or six percent of the one-third that is pinot noir is comprised of still red wine in the blend. The forty percent of reserve wines that are blended into both of these bottlings hail from the extensive stocks that the maison has painstakingly assembled, which are made up of only chardonnay and pinot noir, as “the pinot meunier does not have the same potential for longevity” according to Monsieur Rosset, and hence, “is not well suited to reserve wines.” The vins clairs at Charles Heidsieck are all fermented and aged in stainless steel tanks, though I often find a bit of vanilla in the aromatics of some of the wines, which I had previously thought might be reflective of a bit of barrel fermentation for a percentage of the blend, but Monsieur Rosset noted that “this scent, which is often quite prevalent in the Brut Réserve, is simply a function of the age of some of the reserve wines in the blend.” All of the vins clairs at Charles Heidsieck go through full malolactic fermentation, and as at houses such as Krug, the selection of wines to go into the reserve program is taken very, very seriously, so that in a vintage such as 2002, a great percentage of the production was earmarked to be held as reserve wines, even though the market is clamoring for vintage-dated wines from this year. As Monsieur Rosset commented, “it was a very difficult decision to put so much of the 2002 vintage into the reserve wine program, but it is the backbone of our Brut Réserve and we had to take a long-term perspective when it came to holding back so much wine from this vintage.” While the house is firmly committed to the use of pinot meunier for their two non-vintage bottlings, they eschew using this varietal for their vintage-dated wines, as they do not believe that pinot meunier has the same long potential for longevity as wines based solely on chardonnay and pinot noir.*

*The wines of Charles Heidsieck are truly connoisseurs’ Champagnes, with a level of complexity and breed that is as fine as any in the region. In addition to the house’s two fine non-vintage bottlings and their vintage-dated Brut and Brut Rosé, the maison has also produced two prestige cuvées in recent times. Their current Tête de Cuvée is their Blanc de Millenaires, which is a Blanc de Blancs bottling that was first produced in the 1983 vintage. At that time, they had another Tête de Cuvée, called “Champagne Charlie” and which was made from a blend of pinot noir and chardonnay. The Champagne Charlie bottling has not been made for many years, but a friend of mine in New York pulled a bottle of the 1985 from his cellar recently, so that I can add that note to the fine lineup that was graciously provided by the maison. This small Grande Marque is one of the finest producers in all of Champagne, and though I have never had a disappointing bottle from Charles Heidsieck, the current team, headed by Thierry Rosset, looks to be producing wines as fine as any in the long, illustrious history of this great house.*





*Charles Heidsieck's Chef de Cave, Thierry Rosset, during his visit to New York in June.*

### **Charles Heidsieck Brut Réserve NV**

The current release of Charles Heidsieck's non-vintage Brut Réserve is absolutely stellar. As is typical, the wine is a blend of one-third each of chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier from its base year, with forty percent of the blend comprised of reserve wines. It was aged four years on the lees prior to release and is absolutely singing today, soaring from the glass in a deep and complex constellation of apple, fresh apricot, brioche, a lovely base of soil tones, a touch of orange zest and a very gentle touch of smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine<sup>4</sup> is deep, full-bodied, complex and really beautifully balanced, with great mid-palate intensity, utterly refined *mousse*, stellar complexity and grip and a very long, zesty and superb finish. This is quite simply one of the very finest values to be found today in the world of Champagne! 2014-2030+. **93.**

### **Charles Heidsieck Brut Réserve NV (2012 Release- old label)**

During my visit to the maison in Reims in late March, we were able to find a bottle of the Brut Réserve from a past release, and this was two years older than the current bottling- which could be clearly denoted by its old label and packaging, as the house just launched their new bottle and labels in 2013. There was some speculation at the tasting that this was likely from a base year of 2003. The bouquet is deeper-pitched and every bit as fine as the current release, offering up scents of peach, orange zest, almonds, lovely soil complexity, hints of honey and a touch of smokiness. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and really drinking with great

flair today, with an excellent core, vigorous *mousse*, lovely focus and balance and a long, classy finish. A fine example of how well Brut Réserve ages at Charles Heidsieck. 2014-2020+. **92.**

**Charles Heidsieck Rosé Réserve Brut NV**

Charles Heidsieck's non-vintage Rosé Réserve is always one of the palest-colored Rosés on the market, and the new release is a beautiful wine. The wine typically will include five to six percent still pinot noir in its blend to give it the delicate touch of pink to its hue. The bouquet offers up a lovely blend of wild strawberries, a touch of blood orange, gingery spice tones, warm bread, gentle nuttiness and a very chalky base of soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and beautifully delineated, with an excellent core, frothy *mousse*, bright acids and outstanding length and grip on the pure and very refined finish. Lovely juice. 2014-2025+. **92+.**

**2000 Charles Heidsieck Brut Millésime**

The 2000 Charles Heidsieck Brut Millésime is comprised of a blend of sixty percent pinot noir and forty percent chardonnay and spent more than ten years on the lees in the *les Crayères* cellars here prior to disgorgement and release. I had the good fortune to taste this beautiful vintage twice in preparation for this report, and it continues to deepen and add more complexity with the passing of time. The deep and very refined nose offers up a classy mélange of apple, *pain grillé*, peach, a marvelously complex signature of salty soil tones, orange zest and a dollop of summer truffle in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and shows off lovely tertiary layers of complexity, with a rock solid core, great focus and breed, refined *mousse* and a very long, pure and perfectly balanced finish. Stellar juice. 2014-2030+. **94.**

**1995 Charles Heidsieck “Blanc des Millenaires” Brut Millésime**

The first vintage of Charles Heidsieck's *Tête de Cuvée* Blanc de Blancs was the 1983, and this has been a reference point example of its genre ever since. The 1995 is truly a remarkable wine that I would be happy to drink every day, as it offers up a stellar synthesis of depth, complexity and outstanding weight on the palate. The wine is comprised of fruit from five villages in the Côte des Blancs- the four grand crus of Cramant, Avize, Oger and Mesnil, as well as the fine premier cru of Vertus. The beautiful nose soars from the glass in a blend of white peach, honeyed almonds, a touch of butter, tangerine, chalky soil tones, orange zest, gentle smokiness and an exotic topnote of saffron. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, complex and beautifully balanced, with tremendous mid-palate depth, elegant, pinpoint bubbles, great focus and grip and a very, very long and complex finish. This wine is now at its apogee, but it is so beautifully balanced that it will also have no difficulties cruising along at this superb level for decades to come. 2014-2035. **95+.**

**1985 Charles Heidsieck “Champagne Charlie” Brut Millésime**

This was the old *Tête de Cuvée* at Charles Heidsieck and the 1985 is now at its absolute apogee and offers up a superb, mature aromatic constellation of apple, honeyed almonds, brioche, a beautifully complex base of soil, vanilla, orange peel and a touch of new leather. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and tertiary in its layers of complexity, with a fine core, very refined *mousse* and great length and grip on the complex and very pure finish. I love mature Champagne and the 1985 Champagne Charlie is at its zenith today, though still with plenty of life ahead of it. 2014-2030. **95.**

**1999 Charles Heidsieck Rosé Brut Millésime**

The 1999 Charles Heidsieck Rosé Brut Millésime is absolutely stunning, offering up a deep, complex and exuberant interpretation of this ripe vintage. The wine contains seven percent still pinot noir in its blend, which gives its wine its delicate coral salmon color. The stellar

bouquet soars from the glass in a refined and compelling blend of cherries, a touch of blood orange, rye bread, marvelously complex, salty soil tones, woodsmoke, orange blossoms, a touch of summer truffle and a myriad of discreet spice tones in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and very complex, with a superb core of fruit, lovely focus and structure, elegant *mousse*, vibrant acids and outstanding length and grip on the mature and vivid finish. Great juice. 2014-2025+. **94+**.

### **Louis Roederer (Reims)**

*This was my second visit to Maison Louis Roederer in the last couple of years, and this year I had the pleasure to taste a fine array of the vins clairs with Chef de Cave, Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon out of tank prior to settling in for a range of finished wines in the tasting room. As Monsieur Lécaillon was only a few weeks away from putting together the final blends for the wines that will be based on the 2013 vintage, it was a fascinating experience to work through so many beautifully balanced and unique vins clairs just before the final blends will be settled upon. As I alluded to in some length in the introductory section of this report, Maison Louis Roederer is today one of the very most important houses in all of Champagne, and for far more than their exemplary lineup of Champagnes, as it is certainly not an understatement that the move in the Champagne region to more thoughtful and sustainable viticulture is being led by Louis Roederer. For all of the laudable work that Monsieur Lécaillon and his team at Louis Roederer are doing in the vineyards of the region, converting their own very sizable holdings over to biodynamique principals and leading the way for others to follow, the house would be worth supporting wholeheartedly, even if their wines were in the second division! But, happily, they are also amongst the greatest wines being produced in all of Champagne today, as Louis Roederer is one of the Grandest of the Grandes Marques and completely at the top of their game today. I was very happy to see a very sleek and stylish new package for the non-vintage Brut Premier when we returned from the cuverie and began our tasting of finished wines, which I predict is going to be very popular in the market, as of course, the wine is excellent as always and now comes with a very chic new label. The label on the Brut Premier is not the only thing that is changing at Louis Roederer, as I reported two years ago that the house style here is to ferment all of the vins clairs in stainless steel, with the reserve wines held in the ancient, massive foudres in the depths of the maison's cellars in the heart of Reims. However, now a few of the vins clairs are also being barrel-fermented, as Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon seems forever intellectually curious and willing to look at all his options to make a better and more complex range of wines at Maison Roederer. Readers may recall that the two hundred and thirty hectares of vines that the house owns are sufficient for seventy percent of their production needs each year, and on this trip I learned that the thirty percent of fruit that they purchase every year from contracted growers all goes into the Brut Premier bottling, so that all other wines are produced from one hundred percent estate-grown fruit. Once the conversion to biodynamism is completed, this is going to be a very important distinction. I have also noted that Maison Louis Roederer has adopted the practice originating with Krug to add an ID number to the back label of each bottle, so that one can find out pertinent information about dates of disgorgement and cépages from their website.*

### **Louis Roederer Brut Premier NV (Disgorged October 2012)**

The new release of Louis Roederer's Brut Premier is from a base wine of 2008, with fully half of the blend having undergone malolactic fermentation, which is the most for this bottling in quite some time (though the cuvée based on the 2013 vintage will also be a fifty percent malo

wine, but that will not be out for four more years or so). The *cépages* this year is forty percent pinot noir, forty percent chardonnay and twenty percent pinot meunier. The bouquet is deep and classy, wafting from the glass in a blend of apple, orange peel, fresh-baked bread, a complex base of soil tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and minerally in personality, with a fine core, crisp acids, lovely *mousse* and fine length and grip on the complex finish. Really a lovely version of Brut Premier, which will be easy to spot on the market, as this is the first one with the new label. 2014-2025+. **91.**

#### **2007 Louis Roeder Brut Millésime**

The 2007 Brut Millésime from Louis Roederer is comprised of a blend of thirty percent chardonnay and seventy percent pinot noir, with all of the chardonnay hailing from estate vineyards in the Côte des Blancs and the pinot noir all from the house's own vineyards on the Montagne de Reims, with the furthest north villages used being Verzenay and Verzy, with the exposition of the vineyards towards the northeast, which helps retain acidity and precision in the finished wine. The chardonnay in the blend for this wine is aged in old oak prior to blending, without going through malo, to add roundness to the finished wine, without sacrificing cut and grip. The 2007 is still a young wine, but it is absolutely stellar, wafting from the glass in a mélange of apple, pear, kaleidoscopic minerality, brioche and a topnote of orange peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, young and racy, with a rock solid core, great focus and cut, very elegant *mousse* and simply superb length and grip on the focused and seamless finish. Electric juice- are we starting to see the first impact of *biodynamism* on this cuvée? 2017-2040+. **94.**

#### **2008 Louis Roederer Brut Rosé**

The 2008 Louis Roederer Brut Rosé is made from a blend of seventy percent pinot noir and thirty percent chardonnay, with twenty percent of the chardonnay also being aged in the great old *foudres* in the cellars here, but not going through malolactic. However, in contrast to the Brut Millésime, Maison Roederer uses their pinot noir vineyards in Cumières for this bottling, as these are south-facing vineyards and attain greater phenolic ripeness than their northeasterly exposed vineyards in Verzenay and Verzy. The very complex bouquet is outstanding, delivering a blend of tangerine, wheat toast, wild strawberries, chalky minerality, cinnamon, gentle smokiness, roses and a topnote of citrus peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and utterly seamless, with a fine core of fruit, frothy *mousse* and great length and grip on the complex and elegant finish. I tasted this wine a year ago, when it was still a bit bound up in its structural elements and underrated it quite a bit, so I was extremely happy to see it again in Reims in late March. A great wine- again, could the superior viticulture already be paying major dividends? One of the finest non-Cristal Rosés I have ever tasted from Louis Roederer! 2014-2040+. **94+.**

#### **2006 Louis Roederer Cristal Brut**

The 2006 Cristal is comprised of a blend of fifty-five percent pinot noir and forty-five percent chardonnay, with twenty percent of the *vins clairs* having been barrel-fermented for this vintage. Despite the 2006 vintage's predilection towards precociousness, there is no sign of this character in this beautiful rendition of Cristal, which offers up a deep, youthful and very serious bouquet of apple, delicate tangerine, brioche, fresh almond, very classy limestone minerality, incipient smokiness, a touch of orange peel and a floral topnote redolent of white lilies. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and impeccably balanced, with a great core of fruit, laser-like focus, utterly refined *mousse*, crisp acids and superb length and grip on the very pure and primary finish. Structurally, the 2006 Cristal is decidedly more open than its 2005

counterpart, but aromatically the wine is certainly not more developed and remains a young and very beautiful bottle of Champagne. I really love the background influence from the barrel fermentation here, which gives the wine a hint of roundness out of the blocks, but which does not intrude on the classically racy style of young Cristal. The 2006 Cristal will certainly reach its apogee earlier than the 2005, but this is still a young wine and deserves at least a handful of years in the cellar prior to drinking. 2018-2040+. **95.**

#### **2005 Louis Roederer Cristal Brut**

The 2005 Cristal is a legend in the making, but this wine is still very young and closed and some extended bottle age will be necessary to really allow all of the multi-faceted elements here to blossom and come to the fore. The *cépages* is the same as the 2006, fifty-five percent pinot noir and forty-five percent chardonnay, but this does not mean that Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon selected *vins clairs* from the same crus for the two vintages! The 2005 Cristal offers up a deep, extremely primary and very promising bouquet of apple, pear, a gorgeously complex base of chalky soil tones, incipient nuttiness, citrus peel, smoke, a touch of lavender and a topnote of peach blossoms. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and absolutely rock solid at the core, with great focus and finesse, very refined *mousse*, a crisp girdle of acidity and great length and laser-like focus on the poised, primary and utterly refined finish. The 2005 is an utterly brilliant Cristal in the making, but give it time to blossom in the cellar! 2019-2060. **97.**

#### **Jacques Selosse (Avize)**

*I was delighted to finally have the opportunity to visit the cellars of Anselme Selosse and taste “sur place” with this great winemaker- particularly after having spent the evening before dining in his superb restaurant and relaxing for the evening in his beautifully appointed hotel, les Avizés. Those poison oysters in Reims were now fully in the rearview mirror! As I mentioned in the introduction, I had the pleasure to meet to fellow New Yorkers, Ralph Bonavist and Kathy Fitzgerald over dinner the evening before in the restaurant and was delighted to see that we were going to taste together with Monsieur Selosse the next morning. The beautiful collage of photos from the cellars and restaurant above are courtesy of Kathy. As I noted in last year’s annual Champagne feature, Anselme Selosse has been the architect of the “cultural revolution” in the vineyards that has begun to take root in the Champagne region, and his influence cannot be overestimated when it comes to rationalizing vineyard husbandry and inspiring a young generation of vignerons to follow in his footsteps. In many ways, his pioneering ways in Champagne over the last thirty-plus years are quite analogous to Henri Jayer’s influence in Burgundy over the course of his long career, and Anselme Selosse occupies a very similar position in the eyes of a great many younger vignerons in the Champagne region as Monsieur Jayer did during his days in Vosne-Romanée. The great wines of young Alexandre Chartogne, who worked alongside Monsieur Selosse for several years, are just one example of his widespread influence in the region.*

*Readers may recall that Anselme Selosse returned to his father’s domaine in Avize in 1980, after stints working in Burgundian cellars (including those of Jean-François Coche and Domaine Leflaive), bent on changing the then standard operating procedure in the vineyards and cellars of Champagne, and immediately changed his viticultural methods to reduce yields and do away with chemical treatments in the vines, and he changed cellar practices here as well- barrel-fermenting all of his vins clairs and really beginning to champion terroir in his Champagnes. During our visit, which commenced with a tour of his vins clairs from the 2013*

*vintage in cask, he noted that the only thing he tastes for in his vins clairs is the signature of minerality in the underlying wine, as he finds this the fundamental building block of great Champagne and the element that transcends vintage to vintage variations and the differences of grape variety. As he noted, "I never judge a young wine on its aromatics, only on texture and flavors on the palate- the minerality is so important, as this is what shapes the wine." When one recalls that he has long been a fan of a solera system for his reserve wines, with the new additions of vins clairs that he has decided to keep in the cellar for future reserve wines simply added to his cuvée from this particular vineyard already in the cellar, one begins to understand that for Anselme Selosse, the underlying terroir is the cornerstone of great wine and the vintage characteristics of his various reserve wines will eventually be subsumed under the signature of terroir as the wines have a chance to harmonize in their respective "soleras" in his cellars. As Monsieur Selosse will typically include about two-thirds reserve wines in each bottling (his Cuvée Substance is more likely ninety percent reserve wines from the solera), his feeding of the soleras of reserve wines in his cellar with each new vintage is of paramount importance. It is a very unique way to make Champagne and his beautiful wines are a ringing endorsement for this alternative approach in the cellars.*

*The conversation during the tasting with Monsieur Selosse was fast-paced, as he jumped around from subject to subject with great alacrity and put my French seriously to the test on that morning, but it was a great pleasure to work through the very promising 2013 vins clairs in the cellar and then settle into a fine lineup of his finished wines to complete the morning. We focused on two of his lieux à dits bottlings for the finished Champagne section of the tasting, the Le Chemin de Châlons vineyard in Cramant (as steep, plain south-facing vineyard at the top of the slope in Cramant, which Monsieur Selosse purchased in 2004 and produced his first wine from in the 2005 vintage), and Sous le Mont, which is an east-facing vineyard at the top of the hillside that houses Clos des Goisses in the village of Mareuil-sur-Aÿ. At least I am assuming that this wine was the Sous le Mont, as Monsieur Selosse described the 2013 vin clair from Sous le Mont as "Mareuil" when we were tasting these wines out of barrel at the start of our visit, and this is how he described the finished Champagnes that he served us during our vertical tasting. Of course, it is possible that the older "Mareuil" bottlings hailed from other vineyards, as Monsieur Selosse, to the best of my knowledge, only purchased his parcel in Sous le Mont in 2004. As I said, the topic of conversation was jumping around briskly that morning and several questions were left unanswered as inspiration took wing, but, I am assuming that the wines we tasted were all from Sous le Mont, with some produced from fruit Monsieur Selosse purchased from this vineyard prior to buying his own parcel. The mini-vertical of the Sous le Mont bottling (assuming that this is indeed what we tasted) that we enjoyed on this sunny March morning was truly spectacular and one of the highlights of my spring trip!*

### **Cuvée Substance Brut NV - Champagne Jacques Selosse (Disgorged October 2013)**

I enjoyed a glass of this with my cheese course at Les Avizés (courtesy of my neighbors' generosity) the night before our tasting with Monsieur Selosse. The wine offers up a deep and still quite youthful nose of fresh apricot, pear, beautifully complex, limestone minerality, smoke, gentle nuttiness, a touch of lemon peel and a faint glimmer of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and superbly complex, with a fine core, frothy *mousse* and outstanding focus and grip on the very long and pure finish. A beautiful wine. 2014-2030+. **94+**.





### **Sous Le Mont Brut NV (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ)- Champagne Jacques Selosse (Disgorged 2/13)**

This wine had only been disgorged five weeks before my visit to the cellars, so I have scored it in a range, as it was still difficult to see if it was only going to be stellar, or if its destiny was even higher! This bottling from the Sous Le Mont vineyard was from the base year of 2007, and as the first release of this was from 2003, it means that its reserve “solera” now has four vintages with which to work. Readers may recall from last year’s profile on the domaine, the vineyard lies in the village of Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, on the same hillside as Clos des Goisses, with Sous Le Mont on the east-facing side of the hill, where it receives the morning sun. There is a strong vein of magnesium in the soil here, which lends a nice sense of youthful reserve to the wine and, to Monsieur Selosse’s mind, truly defines this *terroir*. The superb and youthful nose offers up scents of white cherries, apple, plenty of smokiness, a great base of chalky minerality and gentle notes of bread dough in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied



and nascently complex, with a lovey core, great mineral drive, elegant *mousse* and stunning length and grip on the focused and racy finish. This is going to be great wine! 2017-2035+. **95-96+**.

**Le Chemin de Châlons Brut NV (Cramant)- Champagne Jacques Selosse (Disgorged 2012)**

The bottling of Le Chemin de Châlons that we tasted was base year 2006, so the wine was disgorged sometime in 2012, but the fast pace of the conversation kept me from getting the precise month of its *dégorgement*. The vineyard of Le Chemin de Châlons is located in Cramant, right on the border with Avize, and is only a hundred meters or so from another of Monsieur Selosse's single vineyard bottlings, Les Chantereines. The Le Chemin de Châlons (2006 base wine) is absolutely stunning, soaring from the glass in a complex and utterly pure mélange of pear, lemon blossoms, kaleidoscopic chalky minerality, incipient notes of *crème patissière*, smoke and spring flowers. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and very deep at the core, with racy acids, stunning backend minerality, great focus and balance, refined *mousse* and brilliant length and grip on the seamless and electric finish. Pretty good juice. 2014-2035+. **96**.

**Sous Le Mont Brut NV (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ)- Champagne Jacques Selosse (Disgorged 2009)**

This example of Sous le Mont was from the base year of 2003, so this predated the "official" release of this wine from the 2004 vintage. Monsieur Selosse noted that this wine only has 4.5 grams per liter of acidity, due to the very hot summer, whereas his wines from 1996 from this vineyard came in at fully double this amount! Nonetheless, the wine is superb, though a bit more deeply-pitched in aromatics and flavors than the 2007 base wine version. The bouquet offers up a lovely nose of peach, pear, chalky minerality (the ridge that houses Clos des Goisses and Sous le Mont is really a profound outcropping of limestone), smoke and brioche. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very complex, with superb cut and grip (particularly for its relatively low acidity), pinpoint bubbles and fine focus on the long and well-balanced finish. This wine is drinking beautifully, but will have no trouble holding another fifteen or twenty years! 2014-2030. **93**.

**Sous Le Mont Brut NV (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ)- Champagne Jacques Selosse (Disgorged 2008)**

The base wine on this beauty is the superb 2002 vintage, and the wine is absolutely brilliant. The deep, pure and utterly classic nose soars from the glass in a smoky blaze of white peach, gentle tangerine, warm biscuits, chalky minerality, discreet white flowers and the aforementioned smokiness in abundance. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and still strikingly young, with a great core, elegant *mousse*, and outstanding cut and grip on the very, very long, mineral bath of a finish. There is a vibrancy to the expression of *terroir* here that is otherworldly! This wine is certainly approachable today (I sincerely doubt I spit it on this morning), but it is still relatively primary in profile and five or six more years in the cellar are really going to work their magic on this utterly profound young wine. 2020-2060. **98**.

**Sous Le Mont Brut NV (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ)- Champagne Jacques Selosse (Disgorged 2005)**

This particular bottling from Monsieur Selosse is from the base year of 1999, which was a very ripe year in Champagne, and the wine tips the scales at an unheard of (at least in my experience) 14.2 percent alcohol! Monsieur Selosse asked us to guess the alcohol, and knowing that this was a ripe vintage, I guessed 13.2 percent, which would make it more than a point higher than most bottles of Champagne- but I was a full percent too low! In any event, the wine is beautiful and shows no signs of its extraordinary ripeness, as it offers up an aromatic constellation of fresh apricot, pear, toasted almonds, a beautifully complex base of soil, fresh nutmeg, brioche, a bit of vanillin oak and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and beautifully balanced, with a fine core, elegant *mousse*, great focus and a very

long, classy and wide open finish that closes with superb grip and minerality. Great juice. 2014-2025+. **94.**

#### **Avize Oloroso (Still Wine)- Champagne Jacques Selsosse**

Monsieur Selsosse is always experimenting in the cellars, and here was something that one does not encounter too often in the Champagne region, a bottling of still wine made from chardonnay from Avize, made in the style of an Oloroso sherry! The wine is really beautiful, wafting from the glass in a blend of apricot, sweet nutty tones, orange blossoms, chalky soil and a bit of citrus peel from the *flora*. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and fairly sweet- a demi-sec if you will- with a fine core, lovely acidity and focus and a very long, salty finish. This is really good! 2014-2030+. **94.**

#### **Champagne Georges Laval (Cumières)**

*This was my first ever visit to Vincent Laval of Champagne Georges Laval, located in the center of the small village of Cumières, right in the heart of the Champagne vignobles, just a few kilometers to the northwest of Épernay. The closest neighboring villages to Cumières are Damery to the west, Hautvillers to the north and Dizy to the east. The Laval family first began bottling on their own in 1971, when Georges and his wife Nicole decided to try their hand at merchandising their own wines, from their prime parcels in this important premier cru village on the right bank of the Marne River. Their son, Vincent, took over the direction of the family maison in 1996 and instituted a change over to biodynamique viticulture during the early years of his tenure. As Vincent likes to say about his father's and mother's decision to strike out on their own and sell their wines in bottle in 1971, "at this time, there were probably only about a dozen small vigneronns producing their own wine and relying exclusively on the sales of their wines to maintain the family domaine- it was a very courageous decision that they took at that time." Today, Vincent Laval produces three different cuvées of Champagne, a blended wine from his various parcels in Cumières, and two single vineyard wines, both of which are bottled as Brut Nature. The first of the two single vineyard wines is his Les Chênes bottling, which is a blanc de blancs from his parcel planted in one of the finest lieu à dits in Cumières, located up at the top of the slope, just under the Abbaye to Hautvillers. This is a particularly chalky terroir and perfectly suited to chardonnay. His second single vineyard bottling is called Les Hautes Chèvres, which was committed solely to pinot noir vines planted in 1930, and this Blanc de Noirs bottling is also produced as a Brut Nature. These old pinot vines were planted at the top of a plateau of clay topsoil, over a fine base of chalky limestone, and this terroir is perfect for red grapes. The 2009 base year will be the last for these extremely old pinot noir vines, as they have had to be replanted, and the cuvée will now become a Blanc de Noirs made from solely from pinot meunier planted in the same vineyard beginning with its next iteration (base year 2012), with vines that were planted between 1930 and 1959, just down the slope from that clay plateau, so the cuvée will make the transformation from an one hundred percent pinot noir-based Blanc de Noirs to an one hundred percent pinot-meunier, old vine bottling with the release of the 2012. The two single vineyard wines are only produced in top years (though not vintage-dated on the labels), and otherwise go into the third cuvée, which is a blend of all the various parcels that the family owns in the village of Cumières, and which is also finished as a Brut Nature.*

*Vincent Laval barrel ferments all of his vins clairs in very old barrels- for both his Les Chênes and his Les Hautes Chèvres, as well as his Cumières blended bottling- with the still wines spending ten months in these ancient Burgundy barrels (and they really do look as old as*

*the ones found in Domaine Raveneau's cellars in Chablis), prior to being bottled for their secondary fermentations. The two single vineyard wines spend four years on their fine lees prior to disgorgement and release into the market, and with their non-dosé personalities, they are indeed quite young wines when they are released five years out from the vintage and continue to age very well and are even better, to my palate, after they have had some further bottle age. The blended Cumières bottling of Brut Nature, which is typically comprised of a blend of fifty percent chardonnay and twenty-five percent each of pinot noir and pinot meunier, also sees four years on the lees prior to disgorgement. Typically, the Cumières non-vintage cuvée will be made up of ninety percent of its base year, with ten percent reserve wines added in from the previous year. We tasted a range of vins clairs during my visit to the Laval cellars, after having spent an hour strolling through the Cumières vineyards just up above the village center, where the photos were taken that appear in the introduction in the discussion of viticultural practices in the vignobles of Champagne. Vincent Laval is currently preparing his non-vintage wines from the base year of 2009 (a great Champagne vintage) for the market, and they will be shipped in the coming few months. He was just in the process of starting the disgorgement for these wines, and while I did taste the entire range (including the last pinot noir old vine bottling of Les Hautes Chèvres, which will be very, very special and should be on everyone's shopping list), as these wines were not yet officially disgorged, I did not take precise notes on them in the cellars. But, rest assured that they are a very, very strong set of wines from Monsieur Laval and will be outstanding when they are released. I have happily had the opportunity, thanks to the generosity of Monsieur Laval's Connecticut Importer, Transatlantic Bubbles, to taste through a range of his wines here in New York this summer, so that the note on the one finished wine that I tasted with Vincent in Cumières has been generously augmented by several more samples tasted here in the last week. Vincent Laval is making some of the most beautiful wines in all of Champagne today, and though he continues his family's practice of only making wine from a small percentage of his crop (as the family is still one of the top grape-growers in the village and an important source for a many Grandes Marques), he is planning to add another bottling or two in the future and we may see the production creep up a bit more here in the coming years, which will be welcome news indeed!*

### **Georges Laval "Cumières" Brut Nature NV (Base Year 2008)**

The current release of Monsieur Laval's basic bottling from Cumières is base year 2010, but the warehouse made a mistake pulling the wine for the samples and we ended up tasting the release from two years ago! No worries here, as I have always felt that Vincent's wines are built to age and really need a couple of years in the cellar to really start to blossom, and this was proven with this lovely wine from base year 2008. The bouquet is wide open and outstanding, offering up a complex blend of pear, fresh almonds, brioche, a beautifully complex signature of soil, caraway seed and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and shows off very refined *mousse*, with bright acids, superb focus and grip and a very, very long, classy finish. Great juice that is just now hitting its plateau of optimal drinking. 2014-2025. 92.

### **Georges Laval "Cumières" Brut Nature NV Magnum (Base Years 2011, 2010 and 2009)**

This magnum bottling from Vincent Laval is a unique blend of the years of 2011, 2010 and 2009, and is made entirely from pinot noir- though there is not mention of Blanc de Noirs on the label. This was made exclusively from young vine pinot in Vincent's top sites in Cumières, but where the vines are far too young to go into one of his top bottlings, but were interesting

enough on their own that Monsieur Laval felt compelled to make a wine uniquely from them. This cuvée is only available in magnum, to differentiate it from the “regular” bottling of Cumières, which is always a blend of fifty percent chardonnay and twenty-five percent each of pinot noir and pinot meunier. The magnum of young vine pinot noir is really a lovely bottle, offering up an aromatic mix of apple, a touch of tangerine, bread dough, orange zest, fine minerality and that signature Laval (or is it Cumières?) smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and nascently complex, with a lovely core, fine *mousse* and a long, focused and racy finish. Fine juice and quite different from the regular bottling of Cumières *chez* Laval. 2014-2030+. **91+**.

**Georges Laval “Les Chênes” Blanc de Blancs (Base Year 2008) Brut Nature (Cumières)**

The current release of Les Chênes from Vincent Laval is the 2008 and the wine is absolutely stellar. The superb bouquet delivers an aromatic constellation of pear, brioche, chalky minerality, a touch of orange zest, almonds and a nice touch of smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, crisp and rock solid at the core, with the fine structural snap of youth, laser-like focus, very refined, pinpoint bubbles and exceptional length and grip on the precise and dancing finish. It is still early days for this great wine, and I would be inclined to tuck it away for at least a couple more years before starting to open it with conviction. A beautiful bottle. 2016-2035+. **94**.

**Georges Laval “Les Hautes Chèvres” (Base Year 2004) Brut Nature (Cumières)**

I love the 2004 vintage in Champagne, which seems to be getting better and better with each passing year. As I noted above, the Les Hautes Chèvres bottling is always a vintage wine, despite the fact that this does not appear on the label. The 2004 version that I tasted with Vincent in the cellars at the end of March had only recently been disgorged, as this was the last batch in his personal cellar, and the wine is stunning. The deep and vibrant nose jumps from the glass in a blend of pear, apple, a nice touch of fresh nutmeg, lovely spice tones, tons of minerality and a topnote of orange peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and impressively complex, with a superb core of fruit, great cut and grip, refined *mousse* and outstanding mineral drive on the very, very long and precise finish. A great bottle. 2014-2040. **94+**.

**Georges Laval “Cumières” Brut Nature Rosé NV**

It is a very rare occurrence when Vincent Laval has a mind to produce a Rosé bottling, and this is made in such small quantities when he does produce one, that he did not even tell me that he makes a Rosé during my visit to the cellars in late March! The wine is all base year 2011, is fairly deep salmon in color and is quite vinous in style, offering up a deep and complex nose of blood orange, cherries, cloves, a lovely and complex base of soil tones and a bit of pumpernickel bread in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and a bit coarse structurally by the very, very high standards of Vincent Laval, but with very elegant *mousse*, fine focus and complexity and a long, assertive finish. This is a very intriguing and idiosyncratic wine from the Laval cellars, and I have a gut feeling that a few more years in the cellar may polish up some of the rough edges here structurally, and though it will never rank up at the pinnacle of Vincent Laval’s efforts in the cellars, it is still a very well-made Rosé with plenty of personality and I suspect it will be even more interesting to drink in the years to come, though it does not look likely to be long-lived by the high standards of this exemplary estate. 2016-2023+. **88+**.



*Vincent Laval's fine collection of well-aged barrels in his cellars in Cumières.*

### **Bérêche Père et Fils (Ludes)**

*Raphaël Bérêche was a bit pressed for time when I visited the family domaine in Ludes, on the Montagne de Reims, for the first time in late March. He had an appointment for later that day that he had forgotten when we scheduled my visit, and he very graciously waited and provided a fine tour and tasting, prior to heading out for his appointment decidedly on the late side! The Bérêche family can date back their days as vignerons on the Montagne de Reims to 1847. Like so many of the smaller growers in Champagne, the family was content to sell off their production each year to the various Grandes Marques, but when Rafael's father, Jean-Pierre, joined his own father at the estate in the early 1970s, he wanted to start making wine from the family's production (five hectares of vineyards at this point in time), and by the late 1970s, the Bérêche family was producing thirty thousand bottles a year under their own label. By the 1990s, the family was selling eighty-five thousand bottles per year and had bought an additional three and a half hectares of vines. Raphaël Bérêche joined his father at the domaine in 2004, after completing his oenological studies at the university, and his brother, Vincent, joined them in 2008.*

*Today, Bérêche Père et Fils farms nine and a half hectares of vines, primarily on the Montagne de Reims, split between the premier cru villages of Ludes (also home to the fine house of Ployez-Jacquemart), Chigny les Roses and Trépail, as well as villages of Ormes (also on the*

*Montagne, but not ranked premier cru) and in the Vallée de la Marne, Mareuil le Port and Festigny. Since Raphaël Bérêche joined his father, the family has been barrel-fermenting more of their vins clairs, so that now, the non-vintage bottlings will usually be a comprised of a fifty-fifty blend of barrel-fermented and stainless steel-fermented base wines. The brothers have been progressively lowering the dosage for their Brut bottlings for several years now, and typically it will be in the five to six grams per liter range these days for anything labeled as Brut from the family. In addition to the non-vintage bottlings of Brut and Extra Brut that I have reported upon in the past in the newsletter, Raphaël and Vincent Bérêche also produce a Reserve bottling from the family's vineyards, which is called Reflet d'Antan. The wine is a blend of one-third each of chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier from the family's parcels, and is fermented in stainless steel and then aged in old, demi-muids prior to bottling. The wine is made in a perpetual solera system, which was started in 1985, so that once the new vintage of vins clairs have spent six months aging in demi-muids, two-thirds of each barrel are bottled, with one-third of the "solera of reserve wine" to make that year's cuvée, with the remaining third of the new vintage's production added to the solera for next year's reserve portion of the bottling. Beyond these three bottlings from the family's own vineyards, the Bérêche brothers have also begun to produce several additional cuvées: Les Beaux Regards Blanc de Blancs (from the family's own vines), Vallée de la Marne and Côte, with the latter two made from purchased grapes, which are designed to highlight a grape or village from a particular region, and which are one hundred percent barrel-fermented. The wines made from purchased grapes bear the label of "Raphaël and Vincent Bérêche", as this is their négociant line. I had the chance to taste several of these during my visit, which were all new to me, and I liked several of them quite well, though they are not always superior to the excellent regular bottlings from the domaine's own vineyards. Bérêche Père et Fils is making superb wines today, and I was very pleased to have an opportunity to make my first of what I hope are frequent visits the domaine during my trip to the region.*

### **Bérêche Père et Fils Brut NV (Disgorged October 2013)**

The new release of Bérêche Père et Fils non-vintage Brut is from the base year of 2011, with the blend being comprised of twenty-five percent each of chardonnay and pinot meunier, twenty percent pinot noir and thirty percent of a solera of all three varietals that has been aged two years in the cellar prior to inclusion in the blend (so in this case, would hail from the fine 2009 vintage). The wine is young and very promising, offering up a complex nose of tar apple, bread dough, lime zest, chalky minerality, dried flowers and a gentle topnote of smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with zest acids, frothy *mousse* and superb length and grip on the still pretty primary finish. This is young today, but approachable, and another six months or a year of bottle age will really allow it to blossom nicely. Another consistently fine non-vintage bottling from the Bérêche brothers. 2014-2030. 91+.

### **Bérêche Père et Fils "Reflet d'Antan" Brut NV (Disgorged January 2011)**

I had the chance to share this bottle with Klaus-Peter Keller during my visit to his domaine, the week prior to my arrival in Champagne. The Reflet d'Antan bottling from the Bérêche family is fermented in tank and then raised in six hundred liter, older oak casks and is comprised of a blend of one-third each of chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier. This wine is base year 2007, with the wine having spent three years on its fine lees prior to disgorgement. The bouquet offers up a slight touch of oakiness on both the nose and palate, but is quite complex and

vibrant in its aromatic blend of pear, apple, rye bread, a touch of menthol, pinot meunier flora tones, a touch of nuttiness and a bit of vanilla. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with a lovey core of fruit, elegant *mousse* and fine focus and grip on the well-balanced and long finish. Fine juice. 2014-2030+. **93.**

**Bérêche Père et Fils “Les Beaux Regards” Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut NV**

The Beaux Regards Blanc de Blancs is produced from the family’s own vines, with this old vine cuvée made from a selection of vineyards in excess of forty years or age. The current release is from the 2010 base year, and offers up a beautiful bouquet of pear, apple, chalky minerality, a touch of white chocolate and a bit of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and racy, with a fine core, elegant *mousse* and a long, racy and finely honed finish. Lovely juice. 2016-2035. **92+.**

**Raphaël and Vincent Bérêche “Côte- 62 Mois en Cave” Extra Brut (Disg: October 2013)**

The “Côte- 62 Mois en Cave” bottling from the Bérêche brothers hails from a base year of 2007 and is a Blanc de Blanc bottling from fruit they purchased in the villages of Avize and Grauves. This is a very good bottle, but its extended time on the lees seems to have given it just a touch less aromatic precision than some of these other Bérêche bottlings. The bouquet offers up a superb mélange of apple, pear, brioche, some dusty chalkiness, smoke and toasted almonds. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and well-balanced, with a good core of fruit, refined *mousse*, fine focus and a long, crisp and classy finish. Good juice. 2014-2024. **91+.**

**Raphaël and Vincent Bérêche “Côte- Millésime 2002” Brut**

The “Côte- Millésime 2002” bottling from the Bérêche brothers was sourced from Cramant, and is also a fine example of a fully mature wine that shows some leesiness on both the nose and palate from its extended aging prior to disgorgement. The bouquet is a mix of pear, tangerine, leesy toastiness, smoke and dusty limestone soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, long and crisp, with a good core, fine complexity, elegant, pinpoint bubbles and fine grip on the toasty backend. Good juice. 2014-2030. **91+.**

**2005 Bérêche Père et Fils “Vieilles Vignes Sélectionnées” Brut Millésime**

The 2005 “Vieilles Vignes Sélectionnées” from Bérêche Père et Fils is a superb wine that still needs a few years in the cellar to start to drink optimally. The first class nose jumps from the glass in a youthful mélange of apple, tangerine, warm bread, excellent minerality, smoke and the first signs of pastry cream. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, young and nascently complex, with a rock solid core of fruit, brisk acids, very refined *mousse* and excellent length and grip on the focused and racy finish. Fine, fine juice in the making, but give it a couple more years in the cellar. 2016-2040. **93+.**

**2002 Raphaël and Vincent Bérêche “Vallée de la Marne” Brut Millésime**

The 2002 Vallée de la Marne bottling was made up of a blend of sixty percent pinot noir and forty percent chardonnay, but later releases of this cuvée have been comprised entirely from pinot meunier, which the Bérêche brothers feel excels in these cooler *climats*. The wine does not undergo malolactic fermentation. It is barrel-fermented in a mix of three hundred and fifty and six hundred liter casks, with all of the 2002 version hailing from fruit from the village of Aÿ. The wine spent more than ten years on its fine lees, as it was disgorged in October of 2013, and offers up a superb nose of peach, warm bread, a touch of hazelnut, plenty of smokiness, a touch of citrus peel and a great base of soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and gently leesy in personality, with a fine core, lovely *mousse* and excellent length and grip on the mature and vibrant finish. Lovely juice. 2014-2030+. **93.**



### **Bernard Brémont (Ambonnay)**

*I have enjoyed the wines from Champagne Bernard Brémont for several years and was very pleased to have an opportunity to visit here on Saturday morning, prior to my departure for the ten more days of tasting the 2012s in Burgundy to finish up my spring tour. Bernard Brémont and his wife, Michèle, started the family domaine in Ambonnay in 1965. Today, they have fifteen hectares of vines, almost all in this grand cru village (there are a few acres over the line in the grand cru village of Bouzy), with twelve hectares committed to pinot noir and three hectares to chardonnay. They have been joined in recent years by their son, Thibault Brémont and his wife, Anne, with the two generations sharing the responsibilities of running the maison, though Thibault has been exclusively in charge of the viticulture and vinification here for many years now. The family produces four different bottlings of Champagne, their non-vintage Grand Cru Brut, their non-vintage Brut Rosé (which is exactly the same as their Brut NV, but, with ten percent of the pinot noir component still Ambonnay rouge blended in to give the wine its lovely salmon color), their Cuvée Prestige and a Brut Millésime. All of the wines go through full malolactic fermentation. Additionally, they also produce a small amount of still pinot noir from their vines in Ambonnay. This is very much a familial domaine that reminded me very much of many domaines I have had the pleasure to visit in Burgundy, and the wines have been consistently excellent since I first began writing about them eight years ago. On the morning of my visit, there were two wine collectors from Belgium visiting at the same time, and they asked me what Grower-Récoltants in the Champagne region were making better wines than the Brémont family, as they wanted to expand the number of addresses they would stop during their weekend in Champagne. I told them that no one is making better wines than the Brémont family, but there were several others worth visiting (many profiled in this report) that were on the same level, but if they were looking for someone better, that was not going to be an easy task! One of the things I have found at Champagne Bernard Brémont is that I often have a preference for their non-vintage bottlings over their vintage-dated wines, which sometimes are exceptional and other years are good, but not as fine as the non-vintage cuvées. I do not know why this has been the case in the past, and again, on this visit, the 2006 Brut Millésime was very good, but not quite as focused and precise as the exceptional non-vintage wines that I tasted.*

### **Bernard Brémont Brut NV (Ambonnay) Disgorged January 2014**

The new release of Bernard Brémont's non-vintage Brut, which is from the base year of 2010, is comprised of a blend of eighty percent pinot noir and twenty percent chardonnay. The wine offers up a deep, bright and very classy nose of lime, green apple, bread dough, a lovely base of minerality and incipient notes of smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and very well-balanced, with a lovely core, frothy mousse, excellent focus and a very long, minerally and refined finish. This bottling typically starts out in this tightly-knit manner and then shows more richness of Ambonnay fruit as the girdle of youthful acidity relaxes a bit with some bottle age, and this new release should behave in this manner, so I would give it six months of bottle age to really let it start to hit on all cylinders. The wine is finished with twelve grams per liter of dosage, but because of its snappy acid and great mineral drive, seems drier than that today. Fine juice. 2014-2025+. 92.

### **Bernard Brémont "Cuvée Prestige" Brut NV (Ambonnay) Disgorged January 2014**

I have always found it interesting that the Cuvée Prestige from the Brémont family is almost the opposite *cépages* of their regular bottling, as this is a blend of two-thirds chardonnay and one-third pinot noir. The new release is excellent, wafting from the glass in a complex

constellation of apple, a touch of pear, a bit of the Brémont signature fresh herb tones (as I have noted in the past, very reminiscent of young Dom Perignon in this regard), complex, chalky minerality, citrus peel and a topnote of smoke. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with lovely concentration in the mid-palate, very refined *mousse*, excellent focus and grip and a very long, poised and classy finish. This is one of the best bargains to be found in the world of Champagne, year in and year out, and the new release will disappoint no one! 2015-2035. **93.**

**2006 Bernard Brémont Brut Millésime (Ambonnay)**

The 2006 Bernard Brémont Brut Millésime is a very good wine, but at least at the time that I tasted it at the end of March, it seemed just a touch less precise on both the nose and palate than the superb non-vintage bottlings. The *cépages* in '06 of this wine is fifty-five percent pinot noir and forty-five percent chardonnay, and the wine delivers a fine bouquet of apple, a touch of white peach, lovely soil tones, warm bread and Ambonnay smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely broad-shouldered, with good depth at the core, elegant, pinpoint bubbles and a long, wide open and broad finish. The 2006 vintage is certainly cut in a more forward style, but I miss just a bit of the cut and grip here that are so readily apparent in the above wine. 2014-2025. **89.**

**2004 Bernard Brémont Brut Millésime (Ambonnay)**

The 2004 Bernard Brémont Brut Millésime was showing a touch better than the 2006, offering up just a bit more of the house's customary precision on both the nose and palate than the young and relatively easy-going 2006 version. The bouquet is a superb blend of apple, lemon, fresh-baked bread, complex, stony minerality, citrus peel and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, young and complex, with a fine core, crisp acids, very elegant *mousse* and a young and nicely focused long finish. This is still on the youthful side and is showing that slightly green edge on the palate that so many 2004s displayed out of the blocks, but which generally has dissipated as the wines have blossomed from behind their structures. If the 2004 Bernard Brémont does the same, then my score will seem conservative. 2017-2035. **91+?**

**Bernard Brémont Brut Rosé NV (Ambonnay)**

The Bernard Brémont non-vintage Brut Rosé is always one of my favorites of its genre, and the new release is again excellent. The bouquet jumps from the glass in a mix of cherries, tangerine, chalky minerality, smokiness and a nice touch of orange peel. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, complex and beautifully focused, with a fine core, frothy *mousse*, excellent balance and cut and a long, elegant and bouncy finish. This is Madame Brémont's favorite bottling from the *maison*, as she loves its elegant profile. Fine, fine juice. 2014-2025. **92.**

***Non-Champagne Sparkling Wines***

**Bellavista "Cuvée Franciacorta" Brut NV (Italy)**

The Bellavista "Cuvée Franciacorta" non-vintage Brut is made up of a blend of chardonnay and pinot noir and is really a dead-ringer for a top bottle of non-vintage Brut Champagne, albeit with the unique soil signature of Franciacorta. The bouquet is a really lovely mélange apple, pear, fresh-baked bread, lovely, Italian soil tones and a topnote of white flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and beautifully balanced, with elegant *mousse*, fine focus and a long, complex and quite dry finish. While this is a Brut, it probably has quite a low *dosage* and really works well at the table. Fine, fine juice. 2014-2020+. **91+.**

**Domaine Carneros “Cuvée de la Pompadour” Brut Rosé NV (Carneros)**

The current release of the Domaine Carneros “Cuvée de la Pompadour” non-vintage Brut Rosé is a blend of seventy-two percent pinot noir and twenty-eight percent chardonnay. This pale salmon-colored wine is arrived from both a brief period of skin contact during the start of fermentation and also small addition of still pinot noir to the blend. The bouquet is really bright and stylish, wafting from the glass in a mix of white cherries, tangerine, white soil tones, bread dough and orange peel. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and high-toned, with a good core, frothy *mousse* and a long, snappy finish. This is a very elegant Brut Rosé with excellent intensity of flavor and lightness of step. Fine juice. 2014-2020+. **90.**

**Nytetimber “Classic Cuvée” Brut NV (England)**

The Nytetimber “Classic Cuvée” non-vintage Brut is a very good bottle of sparkling wine, offering up a high-toned and vibrant bouquet of lemon, grapefruit, straw, bread dough, chalky minerality and lemon peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nascently complex, with a good core, fine focus, very elegant *mousse* and good length and grip on the well-balanced finish. Good juice. 2013-2020+. **89.**

**Roederer Estate Brut NV (Anderson Valley)**

The current release of Roederer Estate non-vintage Brut is made up of a blend of sixty percent chardonnay and forty percent pinot noir. The *vins clairs* for this bottling generally do not go through malolactic fermentation and the wine is aged two years on its lees prior to disgorgement. The wine offers up a fine bouquet of quince, green apple, bread dough, a nice base of soil and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and youthfully snappy, with a good core, nice minerality, frothy *mousse* and very good length and grip on the briskly youthful finish. A very good wine that will be even better with another six months in the bottle. 2014-2020+. **89.**

**Roederer Estate Brut Rosé NV (Anderson Valley)**

The *cépages* for the Roederer Estate Brut Rosé is the inverse of the non-vintage Brut bottling- sixty percent pinot noir and forty percent chardonnay, with five percent of the pinot noir added as still wine to give the bottling its lovely, pale salmon color. The wine includes ten to twenty percent reserve wines in the blend, which are aged in older oak barrels in the Roederer house style, and this bottling also spends two years on the lees. The bouquet shows quite a bit more complexity from its addition of reserve wines, offering up scents of white cherries, peach, warm bread, lovely soil tones and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and displays fine mid-palate depth, with a fine core, bright acids, elegant bubbles, lovely focus and grip and a long, vibrant finish. Fine juice. 2014-2020. **89.**

**2010 Domaine Carneros Vintage Brut (Carneros)**

The 2010 Domaine Carneros Vintage Brut is made from fifty-eight percent chardonnay and forty-two percent pinot noir, which is a higher percentage of chardonnay than is customary here and reflects the domaine’s impression that chardonnay really excelled in this vintage. The wine offers up a pretty and high-toned nose of lemon, white peach, salty soil tones, bread dough and a topnote of citrus zest. On the palate the wine is fullish, crisp and racy, with frothy *mousse*, fine focus and a long, youthful finish. This is very tasty, but will be even better with another year of bottle age. 2014-2020+. **89.**

**2007 Domaine Carneros “le Rêve” Blanc de Blancs Vintage Brut (Carneros)**

The 2007 Blanc de Blancs “le Rêve” from Domaine Carneros spent five and a half years aging on the lees prior to disgorgement. The wine is still quite young structurally and really deserves a bit more bottle age, but its promise is excellent. The bouquet offers up a primary

blend of apple, pear, fresh-baked bread, complex minerality, a touch of smokiness, lemon zest and spring flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still quite tightly knit, with a fine core, elegant *mousse*, brisk acids and very fine length and grip on the focused finish. This is reminiscent a bit of many of the 2004 vintage-dated Champagne bottlings when they were younger, with just a touch of youthful greenness on the backend that needs to be waited out. Give this superb wine a couple of years in the cellar to fully blossom- it will be outstanding. 2016-2030. **92+**.



#### **2005 Roederer Estate “l’Hermitage” Vintage Brut (Anderson Valley)**

Roederer Estate’s “l’Hermitage” bottling has consistently been one of the finest American sparkling wines made, and the 2005 is another stellar success. The wine is roughly a fifty-fifty blend of chardonnay and pinot noir, and the ’05 delivers a fine bouquet of apple, brioche, a touch of tangerine, gentle leesiness, lovely soil tones, white flowers and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very refined, with a superb core, elegant *mousse*, crisp acids and excellent length and grip on the complex and classy finish. This is obviously very different *terroir* than one would find in Champagne, but in terms of elegant complexity, this is a very *Champenois* expression of a different place and time. Superb wine. 2014-2030. **93**.

### **2004 Roederer Estate “l’Hermitage” Vintage Brut Rosé (Anderson Valley)**

The 2004 Roederer Estate “l’Hermitage” Rosé is a blend of fifty-one percent pinot noir and forty-nine percent chardonnay, with a small percentage of the blend still pinot noir to give the wine its very pale salmon color. Roughly four percent of the blend is made up of reserve wines from the ’99 vintage, giving the wine added depth and complexity. The bouquet is bright and complex, wafting from the glass in a mix of tangerine, apple, bread dough, salty soil tones, a touch of smokiness and a bit of sage flowers in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and really beautifully balanced, with a fine core, very refined *mousse*, with excellent focus and a long, complex and soil-driven finish. This is high class juice as well. 2014-2030. **93.**

### ***Non-Vintage Extra Brut, Brut Zero and Brut Nature***

#### **Ayala Brut Nature NV (Aÿ)**

The new release of Ayala Brut Nature is outstanding. The wine is a blend of forty-five percent pinot noir, thirty-five percent chardonnay and twenty percent pinot meunier and spent four years on the lees prior to disgorgement, and received no *dosage* whatsoever. The back label has a place at the bottom to stamp the date of disgorgement, but my particular bottle was not stamped clearly and I could not make out the date. In any event, the wine is absolutely singing, offering up a deep and vibrant nose of pear, lemon zest, chalky soil tones, brioche and white flowers in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and shows off lovely mid-palate depth, with crisp, well-integrated acids, pinpoint bubbles, fine focus and grip and lovely mineral drive on the beautifully balanced and long finish. This is one of the best Brut Natures on the market today from a *Grande Marque*. 2014-2025+. **93.**

#### **Emmanuel Brochet “Le Mont Benoit” Extra Brut NV (Villers-aux-Noeuds)**

Emmanuel Brochet’s “Le Mont Benoit” non-vintage Extra Brut is comprised of a blend of forty percent pinot meunier, thirty-five percent chardonnay and twenty-five percent pinot noir. Monsieur Brochet took over his family’s vineyards on the northern spur of the Montagne de Reims in 1997, and produced his first wine under his own label in 2003. Le Mont Benoit is the name of his vineyard here in the village, which was once an important source of fruit, but has seen all but its very best parcels overrun over the years by the expansion of the nearby city of Reims. This particular bottling was a blend of the 2008 and 2007 vintages. Monsieur Brochet farms his vineyards organically. The wine offers up a fine nose of tart pear, lime, a very strong vein of minerality, sourdough bread and a nice touch of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep and full-bodied, with fine complexity, a good core, crisp acids and a very long, absolutely bone-dry finish. This is strictly for purists today, as it is very, very dry, but it is well made in its style. 2014-2020+. **89+.**

#### **Chartogne-Taillet “les Barres” Extra Brut (Merfy)**

I tasted this release of Alexandre Chartogne’s les Barres bottling at les Avizés during my spring trip, and the wine is absolutely stellar. I did not note the date of disgorgement, but the wine is from the base year of 2008 and is made entirely from sixty year-old pinot meunier vines in the *lieu à dit* of les Barres in the village of Merfy. The wine was finished with a *dosage* of four grams per liter. This is an absolutely superb bottle of bubbly, offering up a deep and very complex nose of apple, fresh almond, a dollop of lychee, gentle brioche, a very, very complex base of soil tones, lime blossoms, just a hint of mossiness and a discreet framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and rock solid at the core, with lovely acidity and focus, great backend mineral drive, elegant *mousse* and outstanding length and grip on the perfectly balanced finish. This is great juice. 2014-2035+. **94.**

### **Champagne Corbon “Absolument Brut” Brut Nature (Avize) Disgorged January 2013**

The current release of Absolument Brut from Champagne Corbon is comprised of a blend of seventy percent chardonnay and fifteen percent each of pinot noir and pinot meunier. The wine is from the base year of 2007, did not undergo malolactic fermentation and was aged five years on its lees. The bouquet is a beautiful blend of apple, pear, warm bread, stony minerality and smoky overtones. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish and quite crisp, with a fine core, lovely focus and balance, frothy *mousse*, and a long, crisp and quite elegant finish. This seems even better balanced than the version of this I tasted last year, as the structure seems even better integrated into the body of the wine. Fine juice. 2014-2025. **91+**.

### **Nathalie Falmet Brut Nature NV (Rouvres les Vignes) Disgorged May 2013**

Madame Falmet makes her non-vintage Brut Nature bottling from one hundred percent pinot noir, with this current release hailing from the 2010 vintage. This is a classic Côte des Bar bubbly, with lots of limestone-derived personality and plenty of lime zest citrus fruit on both the nose and palate. Like many Grower Champagnes, this is still quite young and zippy and will relax a bit structurally with a bit of bottle age. The bouquet is bright and classy, wafting from the glass in a mix of lime, tangerine, chalky minerality, bread dough, *fleur de sel* and spring flowers. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and racy, with a good core, brisk acids, fine focus and grip, frothy *mousse* and a long, youthful and vibrant finish. Without any buffering *dosage*, the wine really could use a year or two to soften up structurally and let the palate catch up with the stunning nose, but there is no denying its precision, nascent complexity and zesty personality will make a beautiful bottle once it blossoms. 2016-2025+. **90+**.

### **Pierre Gerbais “Prestige” Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut NV (Celles-sur-Ource)**

As I reported in last year’s article, which was the first where I had the pleasure to taste the wines from the Gerbais family in Celles-sur-Ource, the “Prestige” Extra Brut from Champagne Pierre Gerbais is actually a Blanc de Blancs bottling, though this does not appear on the label. I believe this is the same bottling I tasted fifteen months ago, and the extra bottle age has allowed the wine to blossom nicely from behind its structural elements, but to my palate, this is still an Extra Brut that is just a bit borderline austere in personality, and I would not mind seeing this cuvée with a bit more *dosage* and bottled simply as Brut. The bouquet is deep and quite vivid in its mélange of pear, apple, a lovely and complex base of soil tones, brioche, lilies and a hint of orange blossom. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a fine core, lovely soil signature, snappy acids and good length and grip on the focused finish. The bubbles here seem just a touch more coarse than the other Gerbais wines I tasted, and there would be so much more backend polish if there was just a touch of *dosage* to coat the structure. This is a very good wine, but it seems to me that the excellent raw materials here are crying out to be finished as a Brut! 2014-2025+. **89+**.

### **Laherte Frères “Les Empreintes” Extra Brut NV (Chavot)**

The current release of Les Empreintes from Laherte Frères is excellent and has started to really blossom since the last time I tasted it ten months ago. As readers may recall, this cuvée’s *cépages* forty percent chardonnay, twenty percent chardonnay “*Muscate*”, and twenty percent each pinot noir and pinot meunier, with quite a bit of the *vins clairs* barrel-fermented. The wine was very tight last year, but promising, and nearly a year’s worth of bottle age has really worked its magic, as the wine is now wide open on both the nose and palate. The superb bouquet is really starting to show the floral side from the *Muscate* clone, as it offers up scents of pear, lemon blossoms, warm biscuits, chalky minerality, acacia and a nice dollop of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and beautifully balanced, with a fine core, elegant

*mousse*, excellent focus and outstanding length and grip on the long and classy finish. A beautiful bottle that has really started to drink with great precision and generosity. 2014-2030. **92+**.

**Laherte Frères “Les 7” Extra Brut NV (Chavot)**

The Laherte Frères “Les 7” is comprised of a blend of all seven permitted grape varieties in Champagne: Fromenteau, Arbanne, Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier, Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc and Petit Meslier. As I noted last year, the grapes here are all picked and vinified together, with a significant percentage barrel-fermented, and the wine is finished as an Extra Brut. The current release (which may well be the same cuvée I reported upon last year, with ten months more bottle age) is stellar, soaring from the glass in a complex blend of white peach, pear, lemon blossoms, complex, chalky soil tones, a touch of vanillin oak, biscuits and citrus zest. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with frothy *mousse*, brisk, well-integrated acids and outstanding length and grip on the focused and classy finish. Fine juice. 2014-2035. **93**.

**Marie-Courtin “Résonance” Extra Brut NV (Polisot) Disgorged May 2013**

Dominique Moreau makes her Résonance cuvée entirely from pinot noir from vineyards in the village of Polisot and this most recent release is based entirely on the 2010 vintage. I tasted this cuvée a year ago and it was showing beautiful promise, and an additional year of bottle age seems to not have touched this wine at all, as it remains, young, vibrant and utterly stellar. The deep and complex bouquet offers up a still fairly youthful blend of apples, lime, an exotic touch of fresh rosemary, a very complex base of soil, bread dough, a touch of smokiness and a pungent topnote of lime blossoms. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with elegant *mousse*, zesty acidity and excellent length and grip on the complex and classy finish. This is really a beautiful bottle of Extra Brut, with classic, zesty Côte des Bar personality. Fine juice. 2014-2025+. **93**.

**Marie-Courtin “Concordance” Extra Brut NV (Polisot) Non-Dosage**

The Concordance bottling from Dominique Moreau is also one hundred percent pinot noir in its composition, but is made with zero *dosage* and no sulfur dioxide added as well. How this wine will age is anybody’s guess, but for drinking right now, it is really very, very good. The bouquet offers up a fine blend of apple, tart orange, warm biscuits, lovely minerality and a gentle topnote of yeastiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite complex, with pinpoint bubbles, crisp acids and lovely mineral drive on the backend on the long and zesty finish. A fine bottle of non-*dosé* bubbly for current drinking, and perhaps it will turn out to age longer than I anticipate. 2014-2018+? **92**.

**Christophe Mignon Brut Nature NV (Festigny) Disgorged September 2013**

Christophe Mignon is a superb producer in the village of Festigny who specializes in pinot meunier, which comprised one hundred percent of his Brut Nature bottling, making this a Blanc de Noirs bottling, though this term does not appear on the label. This wine is a fifty-fifty blend of 2010 and 2009 fruit, from thirty-five plus year-old vines, with the wine having gone through complete malolactic fermentation. The bouquet is a superb blend of green apple, brioche, a touch of tart orange, a beautifully complex base of soil, esthery pinot meunier floral tones and plenty of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and really beautifully balanced, with refined *mousse*, bright, seamless acids, excellent focus and grip and a very long, poised and impressively complex finish. This is a beautifully made wine! 2014-2025. **92+**.



### **Suenen Blanc de Blancs “Grand Cru” Extra Brut (Cramant) Disgorged April 2013**

This is Aurélien Suenen very first year at the helm of the family estate, as he has had to give up his dream of being a professional basketball player to return to the winery and take over the direction from his father. As this was his first vintage at the helm, a couple of his neighbors lent a hand in the cellars, so Monsieur Suenen was ably guided by the likes of Anselm Selosse and the Agrapart brothers. The Suenen family founded their domaine in 1905 and now has five hectares of vines in the Côte des Blancs, in the villages of Cramant, Chouilly and Oiry. The wine is a blend of the base years of 2008 and 2009, did not undergo malo and its *dosage* is four grams per liter. This is truly a stunning debut wine, soaring from the glass in a complex and very refined aromatic blaze of pear, fresh apricot, *crème patissière*, complex, limestone minerality and white flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and absolutely rock solid at the core, with very elegant *mousse*, great focus and grip, zesty acids and superb length and grip on the very poised finish. Stellar juice! 2014-2030. **93.**



*The chic tasting room at Champagne Charles Heidsieck in Reims.*

### ***Non-Vintage Blanc de Blancs***

#### **Franck Bonville Blanc de Blancs Brut NV Grand Cru (Avize) 375 ml.**

The Bonville family owns twenty hectares of vines in the villages of Cramant, Avize and Oger, with the domaine now co-run by Gilles Bonville and his son, Olivier. I had a chance to taste this wine at the restaurant Les Avizés and found it very well-made, but a bit too marked by

its new oak on the palate for my tastes. The impressively complex bouquet is quite fine, offering up a deep and complex nose of pear, apple, lemon blossoms, chalk, a hint of pastry cream, orange peel and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and zesty, with a good core, elegant *mousse* and an overt dose of new wood on the long finish. The raw materials here are truly excellent, but the wood needs to be tamed. 2014-2025. **88.**

**Gaston Chiquet “Blanc de Blancs d’Aÿ” Brut Grand Cru (Dizy) Disgorged March 2013**

The current release of Nicolas Chiquet’s “Blanc de Blancs d’Aÿ” all hails from the outstanding 2009 vintage, and spent twenty-four months aging on its lees prior to disgorgement. All of the *vins clairs* for this bottling underwent full malo. The wine is young, but very promising, offering up a complex nose of pear, apple, chalky minerality, a bit of citrus peel, brioche and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with brisk acids, very elegant *mousse* and excellent length and grip on the primary finish. The depth and pristine ripeness of 2009 are very much in evidence here, which makes the wine quite approachable today, but it is still showing only a smidgen of its inherent complexity and I would be strongly tempted to give it at least a year or two in the cellar to really start to blossom. It is a fine, fine wine in the making. 2015-2030+. **92.**

**Demière-Ansiot Blanc de Blancs “Grand Cru” Brut NV (Oger)**

Over the last several years, I have been developing more and more admiration for the wines of Demièvre-Ansiot, which strike me as a perfect synthesis of the more powerful style of Blanc de Blancs produced by Oger fruit and the inherent refinement of top-notch Champagne. This is an estate that I am sure produces very age-worthy non-vintage cuvées, and I hope to have the opportunity to put this to the test on one of my upcoming visits to the region. The current release of their Blanc de Blancs NV is excellent, offering up an excellent aromatic constellation of pear, pastry cream, lemon zest, complex, chalky minerality, brioche and apple blossoms. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and rock solid at the core (this is Oger fruit after all!), with brisk acids, elegant *mousse*, and excellent length and grip on the focused and impressively long finish. 2014-2030. **91+.**

**Champagne José Dhondt Blanc de Blancs “Grand Cru” Brut NV (Oger)**

The current release of José Dhondt’s non-vintage Blanc de Blancs bottling is the same wine I reported on a year ago, and the wine continues to drink with all of the verve and bounce of youth. The bright and zesty nose jumps from the glass in a mix of golden delicious apples, chalky minerality, pears, *crème patissière* and a topnote of fruit blossoms. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still quite racy, with a superb core, frothy bubbles and a long, minerally and youthful finish. A very well-made bottle of Blanc de Blancs that shows all of the inner intensity of Oger fruit, coupled with an excellent spine of acidity and impressive grip. This is still early days for this fine bottle. 2014-2030. **90+.**

**Pierre Gimonnet Blanc de Blancs “Cuvée Cuis Premier Cru” Brut NV**

The current release of Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Cuvée Cuis” is young and promising, offering up a pretty bouquet of apple, pear, bread dough, chalky minerality and a topnote of citrus peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, young and zesty, with a good core of fruit, bright acids, elegant *mousse* and fine length and grip on the focused and youthful finish. This will be decidedly more generous on the palate with a bit of bottle age. 2016-2025. **90.**

**Pierre Gimonnet Blanc de Blancs “Sélection Belles Années” Premier Cru Brut NV**

The Sélection Belles Années from Didier Gimonnet is made up of forty percent premier cru fruit (Cuis) and sixty percent grand cru fruit (Cramant, Chouilly, Oger and Vertus), and the wine is aged on its lees for forty months prior to disgorgement. The current release was

disgorged in April of 2013 and offers up a youthful bouquet of pear, apple, wheat toast, chalky soil tones, a bit of fresh almond and spring flowers. On the palate the wine is reasonably deep, full-bodied and youthful, with a fine core, good focus and balance, rather coarse bubbles and a long, high-toned and primary finish. Aromatically, I like this a bit better than the Cuvée Cuis, but it seems to lack a bit of depth on the palate and is not appreciably better today than the Cuvée Cuis, despite including so much grand cru fruit in the blend. Perhaps age will put a bit of distance between the bottlings? 2016-2025+. **89+**.

**Marc Hébrart Blanc de Blancs Brut NV Premier Cru (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ) Disg: June 2013**

The couple of wines I have tasted in the past from Jean-Paul Hébrart (who has been in charge of the family domaine since 1997) I have liked very well, and I was delighted to see samples of his entire current range arrive in my office this past June. The new release of his non-vintage Blanc de Blancs offers up a truly lovely bouquet of delicious apples, pears, *crème patissière*, a complex base of chalky soil tones and spring flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still quite young, with very promising complexity, a fine core, slightly coarse *mousse*, but excellent length and grip on the focused and impressive finish. This is one of those grower Champagnes where one trades a touch of elegance on the palate for superbly complex raw materials (as is the case with the wines from Vazart-Coquart for instance in Chouilly), and it is a trade that (in this case) is pretty easy to make, as this wine really shows lovely complexity and will be even better with a bit more bottle age. 2014-2025+. **92**.

**Paul Louis Martin Blanc de Blancs Brut NV (Bouzy)**

I had the pleasure to taste this new (to me) grower at Le Jardin in Reims. The wine goes through one hundred percent malolactic fermentation and offers up a deep and still quite youthful bouquet of lemon, tart pear, chalky minerality, bread dough, a touch of *fleur de sel* and dried flowers in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, young and snappy, with a good core of fruit, elegant *mousse*, and very good length and grip on the focused and quite refined finish. This will be even better with a year or two's worth of bottle age. 2014-2022+. **90**.

**Jean Milan "Spécial" Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Brut NV (Oger) Disg: October 2013**

The current release of Jean Milan's cuvée "Spécial" non-vintage Blanc de Blancs is based on a blend of 2008 and 2009 vintages and spent three years on the lees prior to disgorgement. The wine undergoes full malolactic. Oger bubblier tend to be broader-shouldered in style, and the Oger imprimatur is very much in evidence in this tasty bottle. The bouquet is a deep and vibrant blend of apple, peach, a touch of hazelnut, chalky soil tones, fresh-baked bread and a nice framing of oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, deep and young, with a superb core of fruit, frothy *mousse*, brisk acids and fine length and grip on the still very primary finish. Blanc de Blancs often takes more time to come around than blended bubbly, and this wine is still decidedly on the young side, with just a touch of adolescent bitterness still popping up on the finish. The combination of Oger fruit and some barrel fermentation will make this wine always a bigger style, but it should start to round into form nicely with a couple of years of bottle age. 2016-2030. **89+**.

**Pierre Moncuit Blanc de Blancs "Cuvée Hugues de Coulmet" Brut NV (disgorged 11/2013)**

The Pierre Moncuit Cuvée Hugues de Coulmet comes from five hectares of vines that the family owns in Sézanne, rather than from the domaine's parcels in Mesnil sur Oger. As I noted last year, this cuvée undergoes complete malo, is raised entirely in stainless steel and has a *dosage* of 9 grams per liter. Last year's version was based primarily on the 2009 vintage, with this iteration being based on 2010. The bouquet is lovely, offering up scents of white peach, pear, *crème patissière*, a lovely base of limestone, apple blossoms and a gentle touch of high end

smokiness. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and young, with a lovely core, very elegant *mousse*, zesty acids and fine length on the focused and still quite primary finish. This is certainly approachable today, but I would opt for giving it a year or two in the cellar to allow its secondary layers of complexity to start to emerge on the palate, as it will be delightful once this starts to occur. 2015-2030. **90+**.

**Pierre Moncuit Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Brut NV (Mesnil-sur-Oger) Disg: April 2013**

The new release of Pierre Moncuit's non-vintage Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs (all from Mesnil fruit) is still a pretty young wine, but it has very good depth and plenty of nascent complexity and will really blossom nicely with a year or two in the bottle. The youthfully fine bouquet offers up scents of pear, delicious apple, incipient notes of pastry cream, chalky minerality, spring flowers and a delicate touch of lemon zest in the upper register. On the palate the wine is medium-full, bright and intensely flavored, with lovely, frothy *mousse*, fine focus and balance, crisp, beautifully-integrated acids, nascent complexity and fine length and grip on the elegant and still tightly-knit finish. This is not a bad drink today by any means, but it will really open up with another twelve to eighteen months of further bottle age. A fine bottle. 2015-2035. **91+**.

**Champagne Pehu-Simonet Blanc de Blancs Brut NV Grand Cru (Mesnil-sur-Oger)**

The Champagne Pehu-Simonet Blanc de Blancs non-vintage Brut is a very pretty and stylish middleweight that is drinking well upon release, but shows fine underlying structural elements that augur very well for its potential for mid-term cellaring. David Pehu has been in charge of the family domaine since 1995, and he is the fourth generation to head the family property in Verzenay. He is not a fan of malolactic fermentation for his wines and routinely blocks the malo for all his *vins clairs*. The bouquet is a stylish blend of pear, lemon blossoms, chalky soil tones, incipient notes of pastry cream and a touch of brioche. On the palate the wine is medium-full, crisp and nascently complex, with good, but not great depth at the core, lovely focus, elegant *mousse* and lovely length and grip on the vibrant and well-balanced finish. A very lovely Blanc de Blancs entirely from the family's small parcel of vines in Mesnil-sur-Oger. 2014-2025+. **91**.

**Pierre Peters "Cuvée de Réserve" Blc. de Blancs Brut NV (Mesnil-sur-Oger) Disg: 12/2013**

The current release of Pierre Peters "Cuvée de Réserve" non-vintage Blanc de Blancs is a very young and very good bottle of bubbly. The deep and young bouquet delivers scents of tart pear, delicious apple, lovely stony, limestone minerality, warm bread and lemon peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and rock solid at the core, with snappy acids, lovely focus and grip, slightly coarse bubbles and very, very good length and grip on the still quite primary finish. This promising bottle needs a year or two in the cellar to emerge from behind its substantial girdle of acidity, but it will be very good once it has blossomed. 2015-2030. **90**.

**Barons de Rothschild Blanc de Blancs Brut NV**

This was the only non-vintage Barons de Rothschild Champagne with which I was moderately underwhelmed, as it is not in the same league as the straight non-vintage Brut or the Brut Rosé. The wine is pretty straightforward on the both the nose and palate, offering up a bouquet of apple, bread dough, chalky minerality and just a whisper of fresh nutmeg in the upper register. On the palate the wine is medium-full, crisp and only offers up modest complexity, gentle *mousse*, bright acids and a really surprisingly short finish. This is okay, but the other two bottlings are much stronger and this year this is the runt of the litter amongst the non-vintage cuvées. 2014-2020. **86**.

### **Vazart-Coquart et Fils Blanc de Blancs “Grand Cru” Brut NV (Chouilly)**

The non-vintage Blanc de Blancs from Vazart-Coquart et Fils is a fine, fine bottle of bubbly. The bouquet offers up a deep and complex mélange of pear, apple, incipient notes of pastry cream, chalky minerality, a touch of fresh almond, apple blossoms and gentle smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite complex, with a rock solid core of fruit, vigorous, but slightly coarse bubbles, crisp acids and lovely soil signature on the very long and complex finish. As I have noted before, Vazart-Coquart always makes wines that are very long on personality, albeit a bit less elegant out of the blocks than many of their neighbors. I have always held that these wines will age beautifully and become more refined with the mellowing of bottle age. I will try to organize a visit to the domaine on my next trip and see if I can arrange a tasting of older bottles of the non-vintage to see if my gut feeling is correct. This is a very good drink today, but will be even better with more bottle age. 2014-2030. **91.**

### ***Non-Vintage Blanc de Noirs***

#### **Baron Dauvergne “Oiel de Perdrix” Grand Cru Brut NV (Bouzy)**

The Baron Dauvergne “Oiel de Perdrix” is an absolutely lovely bottle of Champagne, with the faintest of faint salmon colors and an exceptionally complex and vibrant bouquet of white peach, chalky soil tones, fresh-baked bread, a whisper of tangerine, white flowers and gentle smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and very elegant, with a lovely core of fruit, crisp acids, good *mousse* and excellent length and grip on the focused and complex finish. This is still a young wine, and though it is drinking very well right now, it will be even better with another year or two of bottle age, to allow its secondary layers of complexity to emerge from behind its structural elements. A fine, fine bottle. 2014-2025+. **91+.**

#### **Roger Coulon “Réserve de l’Homme” Blanc de Noirs Brut NV (Vrigny)**

I had the pleasure to taste this wine also at Le Jardin in Reims. Eric Coulon is now the proprietor here, being the eighth generation of his family to man the helm at this small family estate on the Montagne de Reims. The wine spends five years on the lees prior to disgorgement and the current release offers up a fine bouquet of apple, peach, chalky minerality, pinot meunier floral tones, bread dough, smoky overtones and dried flowers in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and very elegant, with a fine core, elegant *mouse*, crisp acids and fine length and grip on the focused and classy finish. Fine juice. 2014-2025+. **91.**

#### **Moussé Fils “Noire Réserve” Blanc de Noirs Brut NV (Cuisles) Disgorged March 2013**

Cédric Moussé and his family have long had a reputation for pinot meunier, which thrives in their section of the Vallée de la Marne, and fully eighty percent of their five and a half hectares of vines are planted to this variety. His wines undergo full malolactic in stainless steel, and the current release of his non-vintage Blanc de Noirs, “Noire Réserve” offers up a youthful bouquet of warm bread, apple, a touch of quince, soil tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still quite primary, with snappy acids, rather coarse *mousse*, a rock solid core and a very long, slightly yeasty, youthful finish. This wine definitely needs a year or two in the cellar to blossom, but I am not sure how much elegance will emerge with bottle age. There are some good raw materials here, but the wine seems just a bit four-square in style. 2016-2030. **87+.**

#### **Mouzon-Leroux “l’Ineffable” Blanc de Noirs Extra Brut NV (Verzy) Disgorged June 2013**

The two wines I tasted from Sébastien Mouzon, the l’Ineffable Blanc de Noirs and the l’Atavique Brut Réserve, are the first two wines he has released after taking over the reins of the family estate from his father. My goodness, Sébastien has hit the ground running, as this is a

spectacularly refined and complex bottle of Blanc de Noirs. The wine is comprised of one hundred percent pinot noir and fifty percent of the *vins clairs* for the blend were barrel-fermented. The wine's label does not carry any designation of Brut or Extra Brut, but the back label states the *dosage* at 3.25 grams per liter, so I have designated the wine Extra Brut above. The bouquet is flat out stunning in its unrepentant elegance, offering up scents of apple, brioche, a touch of almond paste, lovely minerality, smoke and a gentle topnote of fresh nutmeg. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and very poised, with an excellent core of fruit, elegant *mousse* and outstanding focus and grip on the very long and classy finish. Great juice. 2014-2025. **93.**

### ***Non-Vintage Brut***

#### **L. Aubry et Fils “Premier Cru” Brut NV (Jouy-lès-Reims)**

This particular bottle of Aubry “Premier Cru” non-vintage Brut was disgorged in January 2013. The *cépages* is forty-five percent Pinot Meunier, twenty-five percent each of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir and five percent Arbanne. The current release offers up a fine, though quite youthful nose of green apple, tart orange, stony minerality, bread dough and orange peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still youthfully undeveloped, with a good core, snappy, piercing acids, frothy *mousse*, and a long, fairly coarse and still quite primary finish. This will be okay with a few years bottle age, but it is a bit too young for consumption right now, and my gut feeling is that it will never be a particularly complex bottle, even after it has had a chance to sneak out from behind its substantial girdle of acidity. 2016-2025+. **87+.**

#### **L. Aubry et Fils “Dualis” Premier Cru Brut NV (Jouy-lès-Reims)**

The Dualis bottling from L. Aubry et Fils is comprised of a fifty-fifty blend of chardonnay and pinot noir. The chardonnay is aged in new oak, the pinot noir in fourth year barrels. The wine is reasonably complex on both the nose and palate, but also quite defined by its oak elements, as it offers up a deep bouquet of apple, peach, buttery new oak, a bit of chalky soil, brioche and fresh nutmeg in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and buttery, with snappy acids, pinpoint bubbles and a long, oaky finish. There is plenty of fruit to carry the wood here, but to my palate, the oak is rather heavy-handed in style and takes away more than it adds to the overall personality of the wine. Well-made, but honestly, not my cup of tea. Others may like this a lot more than I do. 2014-2020+. **87.**

#### **Ayala “Brut Majeur” NV (Aÿ) Disgorged September 2013**

The Ayala Brut Majeur has unveiled a new, black label with its current release (rather than the old white label with red type), or at least it is new to me, and it admirably includes a disgorgement date on the back label. The wine is excellent this year, offering up a very floral nose of pear, brioche, white peach, chalky soil tones, a subtle touch of *crème patissière* and a garden-full of white flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and very nicely balanced, with a fine core, lovely focus and grip, pinpoint bubbles and a very long, crisp and complex finish. The *dosage* here is probably around nine or ten grams per liter, which may be just a touch too generous for purists, but the balance here is impeccable and this wine is drinking beautifully right now. 2014-2024. **91.**

#### **H. Billiot Fils “Brut Réserve” Grand Cru NV (Ambonnay) Disgorged September 2013**

The current release H. Billiot Fils “Brut Réserve” is a blend of fifty percent 2010 juice and twenty-five percent each from the previous two years., with all of the fruit hailing from the Billiot family's five hectares of vines in Ambonnay. The *cépages* is seventy-five percent pinot noir and twenty-five percent chardonnay and the *vins clairs* do not undergo malolactic

fermentation. The wine is deep and still a bit youthful on the nose, wafting from the glass in a mix of apple, tangerine, brioche, lovely, complex soil tones, white flowers and a bit of apple skin in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, brisk and focused, with fine mid-palate depth, with slightly coarse *mousse*, good balance and a long, primary and mineral-driven finish. This needs a bit of time to blossom from behind its substantial girdle of acidity, but there is fine depth and complexity here just waiting to be unleashed. It is not particularly elegant in terms of *mousse*, but it will still be a fine drink with a bit of bottle age. 2015-2030+. **90.**



*Vineyards in Cramant basking in the afterglow of a lovely spring day in the Côte des Blancs.*

### **Bollinger “Special Cuvée” Brut NV (Aÿ) served from double magnum**

I am not sure if this lovely three liter bottle of Bollinger “Special Cuvée” was disgorged at the same time as the regular-sized bottles here in the New York market, or if this was disgorged a bit earlier than the current release (and which would not be a question if the date of disgorgement was on the back label). In any case, this is a lovely bottle of non-vintage Brut, offering up a fine nose of apple, quince, bread dough, a lovely base of minerality and orange peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and fairly complex, with a good core, elegant *mousse*, bright acids and good length and grip on the focused finish. This particular example was showing just a touch of generosity to its *dosage* on the back end, but it was served in comparison with the stunning 2002 Bollinger R. D., so perhaps this was just a function of the context. 2014-2025. **90+.**



### **Chartogne-Taillet “Cuvée Sainte Anne” Brut (Merfy) Disgorged January 2014**

Alexandre Chartogne’s Sainte Anne bottling hails from several different *lieux à dits* in Merfy and is fermented in stainless steel tanks, with indigenous yeasts and the current release is comprised of a fifty-fifty blend of chardonnay and pinot noir. The current release is excellent, offering the tactile seriousness on the palate that is the calling card of all of Alexandre’s wines that I have had a pleasure to taste so far, along with superb, racy structure and impressive nascent complexity. The bouquet is a blend of apple, white peach, complex minerality, gentle brioche, white flowers and a bit of high-end smokiness. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, young and beautifully focused, with a rock solid core, great cut and grip, very refined *mousse* and outstanding length and grip on the primary finish. This is still very early days for this superb wine, so tuck it away in the cellar for at least a couple of years and let it blossom. Fine, fine juice. 2016-2035. **92+**.

### **Gaston Chiquet Brut “Tradition” Premier Cru (Dizy) Disgorged July 2013**

The current release of Nicolas Chiquet’s non-vintage Brut “Tradition” is made up of a mix of forty-five percent pinot meunier, thirty-five percent chardonnay and twenty percent pinot noir, and hails from the base year of 2010, with a small percentage of reserve wines from the previous two vintages. The wine undergoes full malo and does not see any barrel aging. The nose is quite fine, offering up a toasty aromatic mix of apple, wheat bread, a bit of nuttiness, some leesy tones, smoke and a gentle topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and quite youthful, with a fine core, brisk young acids, frothy *mousse* and very good length and grip on the still quite primary finish. This is going to be a lovely bottle, but it needs at least a couple of years to soften up and blossom on the palate, as it is still a very young wine. 2016-2030. **90+**.

### **Paul Clouet Grand Cru Brut NV (Bouzy)**

The non-vintage Brut bottling from Paul Clouet is made up of eighty percent pinot noir from the village of Bouzy and twenty percent chardonnay from the village of Chouilly. The wine was fermented in stainless steel tanks and went through full malo. The bouquet is lovely, offering up a classic mix of apple, white peach, bread dough, fresh nutmeg and a complex base of soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with snappy acids, solid *mousse*, fine grip and a long, focused and brisk finish. This is quite tasty today, but another year in the cellar will round out its acidity nicely and the wine will be even better to drink from that point forwards. 2014-2025. **90**.

### **Paul Clouet “Cuvée Prestige” Grand Cru Brut NV (Bouzy)**

The Cuvée Prestige from Paul Clouet is made entirely from the family’s vineyards in Bouzy, with the *cépages* ninety percent pinot noir and ten percent chardonnay, with this bottling made from the oldest vines the family possesses. The current release is a blend of 1999 and 2000 fruit, which has been aged on the lees for thirteen years before disgorgement! This is fine, old school bubbly that has plenty of oxidative notes from its long sojourn on the lees, offering up a deep, complex and musky nose of peach, biscuits, a bit of acacia blossom, lovely minerality, orange blossoms and a bit of honeycomb. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with plenty of tertiary elements, fine depth at the core, frothy *mousse* and a long, complex and mature finish. Fine juice that shows its bottle age very nicely, for those who like their bubbly on the older side. 2014-2025. **91**.

### **R. H. Coutier Grand Cru “Tradition Brut” NV (Ambonnay) Disgorged November 2013**

R. H. Coutier is one of my favorite Grower-Récoltants and their new release of their non-vintage cuvée “Tradition” is (again) a blend of seventy percent pinot noir and thirty percent

chardonnay, with this year's iteration based on the superb 2009 vintage. The bouquet on the new release is outstanding, wafting from the glass in a mix of baked apples, hazelnuts, beautifully complex, Ambonnay soil tones, wheat bread, caraway seed and a delicate touch of lavender in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and still quite youthful, with a fine core of fruit, lovely focus and grip, bright acids, elegant *mousse* and a very long, nascently complex and snappy finish. This is a beautiful bottle of non-vintage Brut, but it really needs at least a year or two in the cellar to start to blossom on the palate. As I have said in the past, for those who liked the older style of Bollinger's non-vintage Brut, the Coutier bottling is once again a very worthy substitute in that style. 2016-2030+. **92.**

**Baron Dauvergne "Cuvée Prestige" Grand Cru Brut NV (Bouzy)**

I could not find much information about the new release of Baron Dauvergne "Cuvée Prestige", but the wine is lovely. The bouquet shows a nice touch of barrel fermentation in its blend of apple, tangerine, a bit of butter, chalky minerality, warm biscuits and a bit of floral muskiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and vibrant, with lovely mineral drive, fine complexity, frothy *mousse* and lovely length and grip on the youthful finish. This is fine juice that is certainly approachable today, but I would love to see this again with a few years' worth of bottle age on it. 2014-2030. **92.**

**Joël Falmet Brut Tradition NV (Rouvres les Vignes)**

The Joël Falmet Brut Tradition is his customary blend of seventy percent pinot noir, twenty percent pinot meunier and ten percent chardonnay, with the wine having spent two and a half to three years on its lees prior to disgorgement. The current release is excellent, showing a touch more mid-palate amplitude than last year's release and probably indicating that this is primarily base year 2009 (Monsieur Falmet uses twenty-five percent reserve wines in this bottling). The very classy bouquet is fine mix of delicious apple, pear, lovely, chalky minerality, brioche, a bit of vanilla bean, gentle smokiness and a topnote of citrus zest. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, bright and shows the typical *Vallée de l'Aube* raciness that recalls high quality Chablis. The *mousse* here is very refined, the acids beautifully buried in the body of the wine and the finish is long, vibrant and beautifully focused. This is superb bottle of non-vintage Brut, with personality to burn and admirable structure and mid-palate stuffing. 2014-2030. **92.**

**Nathalie Falmet "Cuvée Le Val Cornet" Brut NV (Rouvres les Vignes) Disg: May 2012**

The Cuvée Le Val Cornet from Nathalie Falmet is comprised of a fifty-fifty blend of pinot noir and pinot meunier, with the *vins clairs* fermented in a combination of stainless steel tanks and older Burgundy barrels. This is really a beautiful wine, offering up a deep and complex nose of tangerine, fresh-baked bread, nutskin, a marvelously complex base of soil tones, ephemeral, pinot meunier-based floral nuances, gentle smokiness and just a whisper of wood influence. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and full-bodied, with great focus and balance, frothy *mousse*, lovely complexity and a very long, refined and classy finish. A beautiful wine. 2014-2025+. **92+.**

**Gatinois "Brut Tradition" Grand Cru NV (Aÿ) Disgorged June 2013**

Pierre Cheval-Gatinois makes lovely and very classic Aÿ wines, with his non-vintage Brut Tradition a blend of ninety percent pinot noir and ten percent chardonnay, with thirty percent of the blend comprised of reserve wines. The current release offers up an impressively complex and vibrant nose of apple, peach, lovely minerality, a touch of hazelnut, fresh-baked bread, orange zest and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and elegant, with a fine core, elegant *mousse*, zesty acids and excellent length and grip on the focused and beautifully balanced finish. I cannot recall exactly how long Monsieur Cheval-

Gatinois ages his non-vintage bottling on the lees, but I am guessing that this includes a substantial percentage of 2009 wines in the blend. A superb wine. 2014-2030. **92+**.

**René Geoffroy “Expression” Brut Premier Cru NV (Aÿ) Disgorged February 2013**

The new release of René Geoffroy’s Expression bottling is all sourced from the family’s vineyards in the villages of Cumières and Hautvillers. The *cépages* is forty-three percent pinot meunier, thirty-two percent pinot noir and twenty-five percent chardonnay, with two-thirds of the cuvée base year 2010 and one-third from reserve wines from the previous year of 2009. The wine did not undergo malo and offers up a lovely bouquet of apple, warm biscuits, a fine base of soil, gentle smokiness, a nice touch of herbal tones and a lovely floral topnote that really shows the pinot meunier influence and hints at citrus blossoms. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and nicely balanced, with a good core, slightly coarse bubbles, crisp acids and very good length and grip on the youthful and rather chunky finish. This has lovely base complexity and is flat out stellar on the nose, but it is not the most elegant of wines in terms of structure and *mousse* on the palate. 2014-2025+. **89**.

**Pierre Gerbais “Cuvée de Réserve” Brut NV (Celles-sur-Ource)**

The Cuvée de Réserve non-vintage Brut bottling from the Gerbais family (Pierre’s son Pascal, and his grandson, Aurélien Gerbais, currently run the family estate) is comprised of a blend of fifty percent pinot noir, twenty-five percent pinot meunier and twenty-five percent pinot blanc. This is the same cuvée I tasted a year ago, with an additional years’ worth of bottle age, and the wine is absolutely singing. The bouquet is a vibrant and complex constellation of apple, tangerine, a touch of fresh nutmeg, Chablis-like flinty chalk, brioche and an exotic touch of lavender in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and laser-like in its focus, with a superb core, elegant *mousse*, zesty acids and outstanding mineral drive on the long and complex finish. I clearly underrated this a bit last year, as this is a beautiful bottle of Côte des Bar bubbly. 2014-2025+. **92+**.

**Henri Goutorbe “Cuvée Prestige” Premier Cru Brut NV (Aÿ) Disgorged July 2012**

The Henri Goutorbe “Cuvée Prestige” is comprised of a blend of seventy percent pinot noir, twenty-five percent chardonnay and five percent pinot meunier, and the wine is good, but not quite as strong as several other cuvées I have tasted from René Goutorbe, who has run the family domaine since the mid-1970s. There is a bit of precision missing here on both the nose and palate that are not typical of wines from this house. The bouquet is deep and leesy, wafting from the glass in a mix of yeasty bread dough, baked apples, filberts, dusty soil tones and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite broad-shouldered, with a rock solid core of fruit, bracing acids, fairly coarse *mousse* and a long, leesy finish. Perhaps this is just stormily adolescent at the present time, but my gut feeling is that this bottling is not up to the usually high standards of the *maison*. 2016-2025+? **86+?**

**Marc Hébrart “Sélection” Brut NV Premier Cru (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ) Disg: November 2013**

Jean-Paul Hébrart’s Brut Sélection is made up of a blend of sixty-five percent pinot noir and thirty-five percent chardonnay. If my math is correct, this is seventy percent base wine from the 2010 vintage, with the remaining thirty percent reserve wine from the superb 2009 vintage. The bouquet is lovely, offering up scents of tart apple, lemon, stony minerality, sourdough, just a whisper of smokiness and a topnote of citrus peel. On the palate the wine is deep, young and full-bodied, with a fine core, frothy *mousse*, crisp acids and lovely focus and grip on the long and still quite zippy finish. Though this wine is approachable today, it is pretty tightly-knit and really could use a year or two in the cellar to allow the secondary layers here to emerge. Good juice that will really sing when it has had a chance to relax a bit structurally. 2015-2025+. **90+**.

**Benoit Lahaye “Brut Essential” NV (Disgorged April 2013) served from magnum**

The Benoit Lahaye “Brut Essential” is comprised of a blend of ninety percent pinot noir and ten percent chardonnay and was made from a base wine from the 2010 vintage. Forty-five percent of the blend this year was made up of reserve wines, and the wine was finished with a very modest *dosage* of six grams per liter. The bouquet offers up a youthful blend of tart orange, apple, bread dough, smoke, citrus peel and a nice base of soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and solid at the core, with good, but not utterly refined *mousse*, fine focus and very good length and grip on the finish. My only (very minor) complaint with this wine is that the *mousse* dissipated very quickly in the glass, which kept my score down a touch. 2014-2025. **91.**

**Laherte Frères “Ultra Tradition” Brut NV (Chavot)**

Laherte Frères’ Ultra Tradition, their non-vintage Brut, is absolutely lovely juice and one of the best buys out there in the market today. I believe this is the same fine cuvée I reported on a year ago, and the extra ten months of bottle age has allowed it to really blossom. The blend is sixty percent pinot meunier, thirty percent chardonnay and ten percent pinot noir, with a significant percentage of the constituent wines barrel-fermented. The deep and complex nose wafts from the glass in a smoky mix of apple, tangerine, bread dough, beautifully complex soil tones, pinot meunier’s gentle floral tones and the aforementioned smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and beautifully defined by its soil signature, with a fine core, frothy *mousse*, lovely complexity and balance and a very long, focused and classy finish. There is just a whisper of oak influence here on the backend, but it simply adds to the complexity of this superb non-vintage Brut. Great juice. 2014-2030. **92.**

**Jean Lallement et Fils “Cuvée Réserve” Grand Cru Brut NV (Verzenay) Disg: Jan. 2014**

The Jean Lallement et Fils “Cuvée Réserve” is a blend of eighty percent pinot noir and twenty percent chardonnay, for Monsieur Lallement’s older parcels, with the average age of the vines thirty years. The *vins clairs* are fermented in stainless steel and undergo full malolactic fermentation. The domaine has holdings in Verzenay, Verzy and Ludes, with the Cuvée Réserve hailing exclusively from the first two of those villages (hence its grand cru status). The bouquet is deep and youthful, wafting from the glass in a blend of apple, a touch of quince, sourdough, incipient nuttiness and a lovely, complex base of soil. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still quite primary, with snappy acids, fine focus and grip, frothy *mousse* and a very long, vibrant and still slightly green finish. All this lovely wine needs is a bit more bottle age to blossom, as the constituent components here are excellent, but it is still a bit on the young side for primetime drinking. 2017-2030+. **91+.**

**Laurent-Perrier Brut NV (Tours-sur-Marne) 375 ml.**

I did not get a chance to visit Laurent-Perrier in Tours-sur-Marne on my trip to the region in late March, as we could not find a date or time during my week there that would work for our schedules. So, I had to content myself with sampling the house’s non-vintage Brut during one of my meals here. The wine is young and feisty, but also very well-balanced, as it offers up scents of lemon, green apple, lovely minerality, rye toast and citrus zest. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and focused, with elegant *mousse*, a good core and fine length and grip on the snappy finish. This is still young and really deserves at least another year in the bottle to start to soften up and blossom, but it will be good once it has relaxed a bit structurally. 2015-2030+. **88+.**

### **Marie-Noëlle Ledru Brut NV Grand Cru (Ambonnay)**

Madame Ledru's most-recent release of non-vintage Brut, which I picked up during my stay in Beaune in November of last year, is probably based on the 2009 vintage, as she customarily ages her non-vintage cuvées three years on the lees prior to disgorgement. The wine is quite lovely, offering up an excellent bouquet of apple, tart orange, very complex minerality, sourdough bread and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still quite young, with a fine core of fruit, slightly coarse *mousse*, brisk acids and fine focus and grip on the long and still quite primary finish. This really deserves another couple of years in the cellar to blossom. 2016-2030. **91+**.

### **Gérard Lorient Brut NV (Festigny) Disgorged Spring 2013**

I love Gérard Lorient's non-vintage Brut, which is made entirely from old vines of pinot meunier that were planted back in the 1950s. The current release is outstanding, offering up a deep and vibrant bouquet of apple, warm bread, complex, chalky soil tones, a bit of smokiness and a myriad of the delicate floral tones that so define pinot meunier to my mind. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and shows off beautiful depth at the core, with frothy *mousse*, crisp, zesty acids, excellent focus and balance and great grip on the very, very long and complex finish. Pinot meunier has the reputation of not aging well, but over the course of the year since I last tasted this bottling (the new cuvée is being readied for release in France and I will report upon it in the next Champagne feature in a couple of issues), time seems to have not touched this at all, and it remains fresh, vibrant and very serious. Beautiful juice and one of the best values out there for non-vintage Brut. 2014-2030. **93**.

### **A. Margaine "le Brut" Premier Cru NV (Villers-Marmery)**

I am not sure of the exact *cépages* of the non-vintage Brut bottling from A. Margaine, but the wine is a very nice, lighter styled bottle of bubbly that would work very well as an aperitif. The bouquet is bright and complex, offering up scents of green apple, gentle smokiness, bread dough, chalky soil tones add a touch of citrus peel. On the palate the wine is medium-bodied, young and nicely-balanced, with a good core, fine focus and grip, pinpoint bubbles and a long, vibrant and frothy finish. The style here is a bit high-toned (at least out of the blocks), but the wine shows nascent complexity and lovely potential. 2014-2025. **90**.

### **Marguet Père et Fils "Brut Réserve" Grand Cru NV(Ambonnay) Disgorged January 2013**

As I noted in the introduction, Benoit Marguet has made profound changes at the family domaine- both in the vineyards and in the cellars- tapping organic and *biodynamique* principals in the vines and paying close attention in the cellars to the overall elegance of the wines. He is also very much attuned to energy lines under the vineyards, as Jacques Lardière at Louis Jadot used to also pay close attention to during his tenure at the helm of that fine négociant in Beaune. The results for Benoit are stunningly beautiful wines that are a major, major step up from his first years at the helm here, and this is clearly one of the rising superstar growers in all of Champagne these days. The non-vintage Brut Réserve is base year 2009 (never a bad thing!) and is made up of a blend of sixty-five percent pinot noir and thirty-five percent chardonnay. It is a stellar, young Brut NV, wafting from the glass in a superb mélange of apple, tart orange, very complex minerality, a touch of fresh nutmeg, warm bread and citrus peel in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and laser-like in its focus, with a rock solid core, pinpoint and elegant bubbles, superb balance and a very long, snappy and mineral finish. Great juice that is approachable today, but will be even better with a bit of bottle age. 2014-2030. **92**.



**Jean Milan “Grande Réserve” Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Brut NV (Oger) Disg 9/2013**

The Jean Milan “Grande Réserve” has one of the most old-fashioned packages I have ever seen, as the customary wire basket to hold down the cork has been eschewed in favor of string! The current release is excellent, offering up a deep and complex nose that jumps from the glass in a blend of pear, delicious apple, chalky minerality, emerging notes of *crème patissière*, apple blossoms and a bit of orange zest. On the palate the wine is young, full-bodied and beautifully balanced, with excellent mid-palate depth, frothy *mousse*, excellent focus and complexity and a very long, racy and classy finish. This is certainly approachable today, but I would love to see this wine again after it has had two or three years in the cellar to allow it to really blossom. High class juice. 2014-2030+. 93.

**Moutard Père et Fils “Grande Cuvée” Brut NV (Buxeuil) Disgorged January 2014**

The new release of Moutard Grande Cuvée is made from one hundred percent pinot noir and does not undergo malolactic fermentation, prior to being aged on its lees for three years prior to disgorgement. If my math is correct, the new bottling is based primarily on the 2010 vintage, and the wine offers up a simply superb bouquet of apple, a touch of quince, fresh-baked bread, incipient notes of almond skin, marvelously complex soil tones and a gently floral topnote. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and still quite youthful, with a superb core of fruit, very refined *mousse*, excellent balance and fine grip on the very long and youthfully complex finish. This does not quite have the same early mid-palate generosity of last year’s

version (based on 2009 fruit), and I would opt for giving it a year in the cellar to start to really hit on all cylinders. A stellar bottle of non-vintage Brut. 2015-2030+. **92+**.

**Mouzon-Leroux “l’Atavique” “Brut Réserve” NV (Verzy) Disgorged June 2013**

The Brut Réserve l’Atavique” from Sébastien Mouzon is actually an Extra Brut in *dosage*, at 3.5 grams per liter, but Monsieur Mouzon labels this bottling as Brut. The *cépages* is sixty percent chardonnay and forty percent pinot noir, with twenty percent of the *vins clairs* barrel-fermented. The wine is superb, soaring from the glass in a complex and very classy bouquet of apple, white peach, steely minerality (the steely signature is a hallmark of Verzy fruit states Sébastien), warm biscuits, smoke and a topnote of citrus peel. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and again, extremely refined, with a lovely core, frothy *mousse*, bright acids and great length and grip on the pure, dancing and elegant finish. Sébastien Mouzon is clearly one of the rising stars in Champagne, and this is another domaine that I cannot wait to visit on my next trip to the region. 2014-2025. **93**.

**Pierre Paillard Grand Cru Brut NV (Bouzy) Disgorged April 2013**

The new release of Pierre Paillard’s non-vintage Brut is base year 2009 and was aged on the lees three and a half years prior to disgorgement. The *cépages* is sixty percent pinot noir and forty percent chardonnay and received a *dosage* of five grams per liter. The wine offers up a lovely synthesis of Bouzy’s generosity of fruit and striking minerality, as the fine bouquet wafts from the glass in mix of peach, ripe apple, brioche, fine minerality, and gently musky floral tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and succulent at the core, with superb mineral drive, frothy *mousse*, lovely focus and grip and a long, complex and classy finish. This wine shows off 2009’s mid-palate amplitude and great purity to fine effect, and is a delicious and very classic expression of Bouzy in a top flight year. 2014-2025+. **91+**.

**Hubert Paulet “Cuvée Tradition” Brut NV Premier Cru (Rilly la Montagne)**

The current release of the Cuvée Tradition from Hubert Paulet has a *cépages* of twenty-four percent chardonnay, twenty-seven percent pinot noir and forty-nine percent pinot meunier. The wine is very lovely on both the nose and palate and really shows its pinot meunier predominance in its great elegance on the palate and its gentle potpourri of floral tones so characteristic of this lovely grape. The bouquet is a complex mélange of white peach, bread dough, plenty of smokiness, complex soil tones and lovely, ethereal floral scents. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still quite youthful in profile, with a lovely core, brisk acids, pinpoint bubbles and very fine length and grip on the very promising finish. While this is quite tasty today, it really deserves a bit more bottle age to really blossom from behind its structural elements, and will be even better a year or two down the road. 2014-2027+. **90+**.

**Champagne Pehu-Simonet “Sélection” Brut NV Grand Cru (Verzenay) Disg: Sept. 2013**

The Sélection bottling from David Pehu is made up of a blend of seventy percent pinot noir from the grand cru villages of Verzenay and Verzy, with thirty percent chardonnay from the family’s home village of Verzenay. The base wine of the current release is 2010, with thirty percent reserve wines from a solera that Monsieur Pehu began in 2006 (in the style of Anselme Selosse). The wine is non-malo and offers up a youthful and zesty nose of apple, a touch of hazelnut, brioche, lovely, complex soil flavors and a touch of (very tastefully done) oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and still quite snappy, with an excellent core behind the girdle of acidity, very elegant *mousse*, and outstanding length and grip on the nascently complex and classy finish. This wine definitely will want a few years in the cellar to blossom, but its constituent components are excellent and it will be a lovely drink with a bit of patience. Impressive juice. 2016-2030. **92**.



### **Piper-Heidsieck Brut NV (Reims)**

The non-vintage Brut bottling from Piper-Heidsieck has improved immeasurably since Régis Camus came over from Charles Heidsieck to take the reins at Piper, and this most recent release may well be the finest to date. The *cépages* for the current release is a blend of fifty-five percent pinot noir, thirty percent pinot meunier and fifteen percent chardonnay, and includes nearly twenty-five percent reserve wines this year. The nose jumps from the glass in a stylish and vibrant mélange of apple, pear, lemon zest, fresh-baked bread and a lovely base of soil. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, bright and quite elegant, with a good core, refined *mousse*, crisp, well-integrated acids and lovely length and grip on the focused finish. Fine juice and one of the very best values to be found for non-vintage Brut. Piper is all the way back *mes amis*! 2014-2030. **91.**

### **Ployez-Jacquemart “Extra Quality” Brut NV (Ludes) Disgorged July 2013**

Laurence Ployez was only a young girl when I first visited Maison Ployez-Jacquemart many moons ago, and she has now been at the helm of the family estate in Ludes for many years, with the wines every bit as superb today as they were in her father’s days. The current release of her Extra Quality Brut is a blend of forty-five percent pinot noir, thirty percent pinot meunier and twenty-five percent chardonnay, and the wine was aged three years on its lees prior to disgorgement, so this release is 2009 base year (buyer alert- grab a case for the cellar ASAP). As had been typical with this excellent non-vintage Brut bottling for several years now, the wine is slightly reductive (in an old style Coche-Dury sort of way), offering up a deep and absolutely stunning bouquet of pear, apple, a touch of passion fruit, beautifully complex soil tones, brioche, a touch of musky floral nuances and gentle smokiness in the upper register. With air, the wine shows more and more of its pinot meunier component to great effect. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with outstanding focus and grip, very refined *mousse*, vibrant acids and laser-like focus on the long and very promising finish. This is delicious today in its youth, but as the note below will attest, this wine’s best days are still ahead of it. Great juice (once again)! 2014-2030+. **93.**

### **Ployez-Jacquemart “Extra Quality” Brut NV (Ludes) Old Blue and White Label**

According to my cellar records, I put this bottle of non-vintage Ployez-Jacquemart down in 2008, and the wine was drinking beautifully when I pulled it out in January of this year. The wine has the old, ornate blue and white label that I found so stunning, and I am sorry that the house has discontinued this label in recent years. In any event, the wine is beautiful and drinking with great style and breed, wafting from the glass in a blend of apple, pear, brioche, toasted almond, a fine base of soil and a topnote of orange blossoms. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very suave on the attack, with a lovely core, elegant *mousse*, lovely, mellowed complexity and fine focus and grip on the long and vibrant finish. This is just a beautiful moment to be drinking this wine and yet another example of how well non-vintage bottlings can evolve and blossom with extended cellaring. 2014-2020+. **92.**

### **Barons de Rothschild Brut NV**

The current release of the Barons de Rothschild non-vintage Brut is a very good bottle of bubbly, and I would have loved it if there was more information about the wine on the back label or if a *fiche technique* had been sent along with the samples (as naturally, I cannot recall which importer sent me these bottles). The bouquet is a bright and classy blend of apple, orange zest, brioche, a touch of fresh coconut, a nice base of soil and a bit of gentle smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and reasonably complex, with a good

core, pinpoint bubbles, good focus and a long, classy finish that closes with lovely grip and purity. Good juice. 2014-2030. **90+**.

**Camille Savès Carte Blanche Premier Cru Brut NV (2013 Release) served from magnum**

In my experience, the wines from Camille Savès age very well and last year's release of the Carte Blanche out of magnum is really starting to blossom and hit on all cylinders. The lovely nose wafts from the glass in a mix of apple, chalky soil tones, brioche, citrus peel and a nice dollop of smokiness developing in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and nicely balanced, with a fine core, elegant *mousse* and fine length and grip on the bright and wide open finish. Lovely juice. 2014-2030. **90**.

**Fernand Thill "Brut Tradition" Grand Cru NV (Verzy)**

The Thill family, originally from Luxembourg, have been part of the Champagne landscape since the latter half of the nineteenth century. The family has vineyards in Verzy and neighboring Verzenay, and Fernand Thill began to bottle some of his own production back in 1953. Today the estate is run by his daughter, Marie-Thérèse, who took over from her father upon his passing in 1975. I had a chance to taste this wine of the list at Anselme Selosse's fine restaurant of Les Avizés and found it really quite good. The wine is a blend of chardonnay and pinot noir (though I am not certain of the proportions) and offers up a fine nose of lime, pear, complex minerality, warm bread, citrus peel and a gentle touch of fresh herbs in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and nicely balanced, with a good core, refined *mousse*, and very good length and grip on the nascently complex finish. Good juice. 2014-2025. **90**.

**Varnier-Fanniere Grand Cru Brut NV (Avize) Disgorged September 2013**

The Varnier-Fanniere non-vintage Brut is a Blanc de Blancs, though there is no mention on the label, as the family owns four hectares of chardonnay in the villages of Avize, Cramant and Oiry in the Côte des Blancs. Typically Denis Varnier will age his non-vintage bottling for two and a half years on the lees, so this release is probably a blend of 2010 base wine and 2009 reserve wines. The current bottling is classic Blanc de Blancs, with lovely focus and complexity and a gracious element to its structure that is most impressive. The bouquet is a refined blend of apple, pear, *crème patissière*, chalky minerality, warm biscuits and fruit blossoms. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and very nicely balanced, with nascent complexity, crisp acids, frothy *mousse* and lovely length and grip on the youthful finish. It is only on the backend that this cuvée shows just a touch of youthful austerity, and I would suggest a year's worth of bottle age would really pay dividends here. Fine juice. 2015-2025+. **90+**.

**Marie Weiss Brut NV (Ludes)**

The Marie Weiss label is made by Ployez-Jacquemart and effectively is their second label, as the Ployez family makes this bottling from purchased grapes. The *cépages* of the current release is fifty percent chardonnay and twenty-five percent each of pinot noir and pinot meunier, with a *dosage* of 6.5 grams per liter. The wine offers up a lovely and vibrant nose of pear, bread dough, chalky minerality, hints of the pastry cream to come with further bottle age and a topnote of white flowers. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and elegant, with youthful acids, refined *mousse*, lovely focus and grip and a very long, nascently complex and zesty finish. This does not quite match the Ployez estate bottlings for mid-palate depth, but it luxuriates in the family's fine and elegant touch and really is a superb middleweight bubbly and a great value. 2014-2025+. **90+**.

### ***Non-Vintage Brut and Extra Brut Rosé***

#### **Ayala “Rosé Majeur” Brut NV (Aÿ)**

I had bad luck with the typesetter on the back labels of the samples I received from Ayala this spring, as this too has a spot for the date of disgorgement on the back, but it did not print and hence, there was no date. In any event, the wine is comprised of a blend of fifty-one percent chardonnay, forty percent pinot noir and nine percent pinot meunier and was aged on the lees for thirty months prior to disgorgement (whenever that was), and then was given an additional three months in the cellars prior to release. The color is a lovely salmon color, with a bit deeper hue than many of the Brut Rosés out there these days, and offers up a lovely and quite vibrant bouquet of white cherries, tangerine, chalky minerality, bread dough, lovely spice tones, dried roses and a dollop of citrus zest in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, crisp and very well-balanced, with a good core, fine focus and grip, frothy *mousse* and very good length on the bright and complex finish. Today, the wine is a touch more complex on the nose than the palate, but another year in the cellar will allow the palate to play catch up. A very pretty bottle. 2014-2025. **90+**.

#### **Bollinger Brut Rosé NV (Aÿ)**

The current release of Bollinger’s fine Brut Rosé is a pale salmon color and offers up a bright and vibrant bouquet of white cherries, tangerine, wheat toast, fine soil tones, a touch of caraway seed and dried flowers in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and very well-balanced, with zesty acids, fine focus and grip, refined *mousse* and very good length and grip on the long and complex finish. Very nice juice. 2014-2025+. **91**.

#### **Chartogne-Taillet Brut Rosé (Merfy) Disgorged September 2013**

The new release of Alexandre Chartogne’s Brut Rosé is a blend of sixty percent chardonnay and forty percent pinot noir and is a lovely, pale salmon color. The wine is young on both the nose and palate, but shows excellent promise. The bouquet is a primary constellation of strawberries, tangerine, chalky soil tones, gentle smokiness, rye bread, orange peel, hints of the spices to come with bottle age and dried flowers in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and deep in the mid-palate, with frothy *mousse*, crisp acids, excellent focus and grip, nascent complexity and a very long, soil-driven finish of impressive bounce and structural integrity. Like the current release of the Cuvée Sainte Anne, this lovely Rosé really deserves some time in the cellar to develop its secondary layers of complexity and really blossom. Not surprisingly, this is a very serious example that is long on *terroir* and short on pretension. 2016-2030. **92**.

#### **Paul Clouet Brut Rosé Grand Cru NV (Bouzy)**

The non-vintage Paul Clouet Brut Rosé is a very tasty bottle, with a fairly deep salmon color and superb nose of cherries, strawberries, wheat toast, chalky soil tones and a topnote of orange peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and quite refined on the attack, with a sappy core of fruit, frothy *mousse* and fine length and grip on the focused and well-balanced finish. Twenty percent of this bottling is comprised of pinot noir, eighty percent of the blend chardonnay, and of the twenty percent pinot, twelve percent of this is still wine. This is a lovely Rosé. 2014-2025. **90**.

#### **R. H. Coutier “Cuvée Rosé” Brut Grand Cru (Ambonnay) Disgorged November 2013**

The new release of R. H. Coutier’s “Cuvée Rosé” is young and very fine, showing the same beautiful cherry-rose color that comes from a large percentage of Ambonnay still pinot noir added to the blend. The *cépages* here is fifty-five percent chardonnay and forty-five percent pinot noir, and as is typical of the house style preferred by René Coutier, about half of the *vins*

*clairs* in the blend did not go through malo. The bouquet is bright and classy, wafting from the glass in a mix of cherries, a hint of pomegranate, beautifully complex soil tones, wheat toast and a nice topnote of rose petals. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and focused, with a lovely core of fruit, superb balance and grip, snappy acids and excellent length on the long and vinous finish. Fine juice, but clearly aimed to perform optimally at the table. 2014-2025+. **92.**



#### **Gatinois Brut Rosé Grand Cru (Aÿ) Disgorged February 2014**

The Gatinois Brut Rosé is one of my absolute favorite bottlings of this genre produced in Champagne. As I reported last year, the *cépages* on this excellent cuvée is ninety percent pinot noir and ten percent chardonnay, with the wine aging for three years on the lees prior to disgorgement. The family adds seven percent still, old vine pinot noir to the blend. The bouquet on the new release is outstanding, jumping from the glass in a vibrant blend of cherries, *fraises du bois*, rye bread, beautifully complex soil tones, a touch of caraway seed and a gentle floral topnote redolent of roses. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still quite youthfully snappy, with a lovely core of fruit, excellent focus and grip, frothy, refined *mousse* and excellent length and grip on the still very primary finish. This is primarily 2010 base wine, and it needs a bit of time to blossom, but it is going to be outstanding a year from now, if not quite as brilliant as last year's version based on the 2009 vintage. 2015-2030. **92+.**

#### **Jean-François Geoffroy “Blanc de Rosé” Extra Brut (Aÿ) Disgorged January 2013**

Jean-François Geoffroy's “Blanc de Rosé” is a very unique wine, as this fifty-fifty blend of pinot noir and chardonnay is fermented together, to marry the two varietals right from the

start, and is produced by the *saignée* method as well. The wine does not undergo malo and spends two and a half years on the lees prior to disgorgement. The current release offers up a beautifully vibrant pink salmon color, and a youthful, slightly reductive, spicy nose of blood orange, white cherries, rye bread, orange peel, dried roses and a lovely base of minerality. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and very racy, with its non-malo personality providing plenty of spine and cut. The *mousse* is elegant and frothy, the wine is focused and nicely balanced and offers up excellent length and grip on the snappy finish. This is dynamite wine in that racy, non-malo style, but the touch of reduction has to be worked around with some aeration. 2014-2024. **90+**.

**Laherte Frères “Ultra Tradition” Brut Rosé NV (Chavot)**

The release of Laherte Frères “Ultra Tradition” non-vintage Brut Rosé that is currently in the market is a blend of sixty percent pinot meunier, thirty percent pinot noir and ten percent chardonnay. This is the same bottling I reported on a year ago, and the year’s-worth of bottle age has really allowed the bouquet to blossom, as it now jumps from the glass in a vibrant mix of cherries, blood orange, wheat toast, stony minerality, dried rose petals and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still plenty racy, with a fine core of fruit, frothy *mousse* and a long, complex and still fairly youthful finish. This is a lovely bottle of Brut Rosé, with a quite a low *dosage* and great cut and focus on the backend. It will still be better with another year or two in the cellar, but it is blossoming nicely and is already a fine drink. 2014-2025+. **91**.

**Laherte Frères “les Beaudiers” Rosé Saignée “Vieilles Vignes” Extra Brut NV**

The Laherte Frères “les Beaudiers” Rosé Saignée “Vieilles Vignes” bottling is entirely from old vine pinot meunier. I did not have a chance to taste this wine last year, as I ran out of steam at Laherte’s New York importer’s fabulous portfolio tasting, but had very much enjoyed this bottling two years ago. The current release is not quite as dark in color as I remember the wine in the past, offering up a more classical salmon rose color and offering up a lovely bouquet of blood orange, cinnamon sticks, cloves, wheat toast, chalky soil nuances and a nice touch of oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite vinous in style (as is typical of this fine *cuvée*), with a rock solid core, brisk acids, elegant *mousse* and a long, nascently complex and snappy finish. This is still quite youthful (the bottle is almost a touch reduced today!) and really could use another year or two in the cellar to start to blossom from behind its substantial structure, but it will be a fine drink in due course. 2016-2030. **90+**.

**Jean Lallement et Fils “Réserve Rosée” Brut NV (Verzenay) Disgorged May 2013**

The Jean Lallement et Fils “Réserve Rosée” non-vintage Brut is made entirely from pinot noir, from the family’s four hectares of vines split between the grand cru villages of Verzenay and Verzy, as well as a few in the premier cru village of Ludes, on the Montagne de Reims. The current release of the Réserve Rosée is a fairly deep salmon color and offers up a very vibrant and fairly vinous bouquet of blood orange, wheat bread, a bit of cherry skin, caraway seed, beautifully complex soil tones and a bit of smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and rock solid at the core, with crisp acids, great focus and grip, very elegant *mousse* and a very long, balanced and vinous finish. This is a superb bottle of Rosé that is best at the table, and though it is already quite tasty, clearly a couple more years in the cellar will allow it to develop some of its secondary layers of complexity and really start to hit on all cylinders. Fine juice. 2016-2030. **92+**.

**A. Margaine Brut Rosé Premier Cru NV (Villers-Marmery) Disgorged July 2013**

The current release of Arnaud Margaine's non-vintage Brut Rosé is comprised of a blend of eighty percent chardonnay and twenty percent pinot noir. The color is a very pretty pale salmon and the bouquet offers up a fine mélange of blood orange, warm bread, gentle spice tones, a touch of lavender and a lovely base of soil. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and snappy, with a fine core of fruit, frothy *mousse* and very good length and grip on the fairly vinous finish. Arnaud Margaine has been blocking more of the malo for his *vins clairs* in recent years, and there is certainly some non-malo cut and grip in evidence here. This is good juice, if not the most elegant rendition of Brut Rosé. 2014-2025. **89+**.

**Marguet Père et Fils Brut Rosé Grand Cru NV (Ambonnay) Disgorged May 2013**

This is another of Benoit Marguet's new bottlings and it is a spectacular value. The bouquet soars from the glass in a blaze of white cherries, wild strawberries, chalky soil tones, orange blossoms, a touch of saffron and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very light on its feet, with a rock solid core, vibrant acids, superbly refined *mousse* and lovely grip and focus on the very long and seamless finish. This is great non-vintage Rosé! 2014-2030. **93**.

**Christophe Mignon "Pur Meunier" Brut Rosé NV (Festigny)**

Christophe Mignon's Brut Rosé is comprised entirely of pinot meunier, from vines that are closing in on their fortieth birthday. The current release is a fifty-fifty blend of 2010 and 2009 vintage juice and was disgorged in June of 2012. It is a lovely wine, with a bright salmon color and offering up a complex and elegant bouquet of cherries, tangerine, rye bread, lovely soil tones, a bit of smokiness and dried rose petals. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, pure and very refined, with pinpoint bubbles, a lovely core, fine focus and grip and a very long, complex and zesty finish. Fine juice. 2014-2020+. **91+**.

**Moutard Père et Fils Brut "Rosé de Cuvaizon" NV (Buxeuil) Disgorged October 2012**

The current release of the Moutard Père et Fils non-vintage Brut Rosé is made entirely from pinot noir and is a beautiful cherry-salmon color. The wine offers up a superb bouquet of wild strawberries, blood orange, beautiful and quite exotic spice tones reminiscent of saffron and lavender, a beautifully complex base of soil, gentle smokiness and a topnote of fresh-baked bread. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and vibrant, with youthful acids, lovely *mousse*, excellent focus and balance and a long, complex and classy finish. This is the same cuvée I tasted last year, where I had a very, very slight issue with its length on the backend, but I do not find this to be the case this year and it seems that I underrated this lovely Brut Rosé a bit last time around. Fine, fine juice from one of my favorite small domaines. 2014-2030. **91**.

**Piper-Heidsieck "Rosé Sauvage" Brut NV (Reims)**

The new release of Piper-Heidsieck's "Rosé Sauvage", which typically includes around a quarter of still pinot noir in the blend, is once again excellent. The color here is quite dark for a rosé Champagne- fairly deep cherry red- and the wine has plenty of vinosity in evidence on both the nose and palate. The bouquet is a deep and complex blend of cherries, orange peel, a bit of spiced meat, lovely soil tones, woodsmoke, cloves and rye toast. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and complex, with a rock solid core, zesty acidity, laser-like focus, superb *mousse* and excellent length and grip on the vibrant and very well-balanced finish. This cuvée seems to get a bit better every year! Lovely wine. 2014-2025. **91**.

**Ployez-Jacquemart Extra Brut Rosé NV (Ludes) Disgorged July 2013**

The new release of the Ployez family's Extra Brut Rosé is a blend of fifty-five percent pinot meunier, thirty-nine percent chardonnay and six percent pinot noir. As ten percent of the

blend is still red wine, one has to assume that a significant percentage (all of it?) is still pinot meunier, with the still wine aged in oak barrels. The bouquet is excellent, offering up a spicy and vibrant mélange of blood orange, quince, cloves, beautifully complex minerality, a dollop of wheat toast and orange peel in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and tightly-knit, with a lovely core of fruit, great soil signature, very refined *mousse*, zesty acids and outstanding length and grip on the complex and perfectly balanced finish. This is high class Rosé that is very long on elegance and intensity of flavor. 2014-2025+. **93.**

#### **Barons de Rothschild Brut Rosé NV**

The Barons de Rothschild non-vintage Brut Rosé is a very good bottle, offering up a tightly-knit, youthful and very well-balanced palate impression. The nose is very good, wafting from the glass in a blend of tart cherry, melon, stony minerality, warm bread and a nice touch of gentle smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and shows off good mid-palate depth, with elegant *mousse*, crisp acids and a long, bouncy and quite refined finish. Good juice. 2014-2025. **90.**

#### **Camille Savès Brut Rosé NV (2010 Release)**

I had kept this bottle of Camille Savès Brut Rosé in my cellar since the fall of 2010, and the wine aged with great style and was really drinking well when opened upon my return from Europe in the middle of April. The bouquet offers up a superb aromatic constellation of blood orange, wild strawberries, rye bread, chalky minerality and dried rose petals in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and beautifully mineral in personality, with a fine core, elegant *mousse*, and excellent length and grip on the complex and still very vibrant finish. Fine juice that has really blossomed structurally with some bottle age and is now drinking at its apogee, though still with plenty of life ahead of it! 2014-2025. **92.**

#### **Vilmart Cie “Cuvée Rubis” Brut Rosé Premier Cru NV (Rilly-la-Montagne)**

The current release of Vilmart Cie’s Cuvée Rubis is comprised of ninety percent pinot noir and ten percent chardonnay and was done as a *saignée*, rather than adding a bit of still pinot noir to create the rosé color. The wine is quite fine, as its oak component is very nicely understated and plays a fine supporting role to the main fireworks on the nose and palate. The bouquet is a mix of cherries, red currants, cloves, lovely soil tones, rye toast and a bit of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a fine core, elegant *mousse*, fine focus and grip and a long, slightly tannic finish. The balance here is just fine and I do not see any issues down the road with the touch of wood tannins, but exclusively older wood is not something that would be a detriment to this bottling. This is a very well-made wine, but I am more attracted to the organic natural beauty of Alexandre Chartogne’s style of Rosé over the Cuvée Rubis, even if the two wines are not all that far apart in quality. 2014-2025+. **91+.**

#### ***Vintage Blanc de Blancs***

##### **2008 Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Cuvée Gastronome” 1er Cru Blanc de Blancs Brut**

The 2008 Cuvée Gastronome from Pierre Gimonnet et Fils was disgorged in May of 2013 and, though the wine is listed as premier cru, only twenty-nine percent of the blend hails from premier cru vineyards (all in the Gimonnet home base of Cuis), the remainder of the blend hails from grand cru villages in the Côte des Blancs. The wine is superb on both the nose and palate, offering up a fine bouquet of pear, apple, fresh-baked bread, chalky minerality, a touch of citrus peel and a bit of fresh almond in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still quite young and structured, with a very good core, slightly coarse *mousse*, crisp acids



and lovely soil drive on the fairly long and complex finish. This needs a couple of years to relax structurally, but will be lovely wine once it has blossomed. 2016-2030+. **90+**.

**2007 Ayala Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime (Aÿ) Disgorged February 2013**

The 2007 Ayala Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime is a fine follow-up to the lovely 2005 version I reported upon last year. As I noted then, this cuvée hails exclusively from the grand cru villages of Mesnil-sur-Oger, Avize and Chouilly. The bouquet is deep and youthfully vibrant, wafting from the glass in a mix of lemon chiffon, pear, chalky soil tones, bread dough, spring flowers and incipient notes of *crème patissière*. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and very elegant, with a fine core, frothy *mousse*, lovely focus and nascent complexity and a long, poised and snappy finish. Fine juice in the more ethereal style of Blanc de Blancs that will make this an excellent *apéritif* Champagne. 2014-2030. **92**.

**2007 Champagne Deutz Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime (Aÿ)**

It is interesting that my score on the 2007 Deutz Blanc de Blancs has gone up a tick every time I have tasted it in the last two years, as the wine has blossomed beautifully from behind its substantial structural attributes of youth. This most recent bottle was the finest yet, offering up a lovely nose of apple, tart orange, fresh-baked bread, chalky soil tones, gentle smokiness and a nice topnote of citrus peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and quite elegant, with a good core, still a fairly tightly-knit personality, refined *mousse* and lovely length and grip on the focused and very well-balanced finish. I would still like to give this lovely bottle another year or two in the cellar to fully blossom, but it is not a bad drink today by any stretch of the imagination! Clearly, I have been slightly underrated this wine from the start. 2015-2035. **92+**.



**2005 Pierre Gimonnet Spécial Club Grands Terroirs de Chardonnay Brut (Disg: 10/2013)**

The 2005 Pierre Gimonnet Spécial Club “Grands Terroirs de Chardonnay” is really a superb wine, with a very refined nose and all of the impressive structural elements that the 2005 wines are showing today. The first class bouquet wafts from the glass in a mélange of pear, nectarine, pastry cream, chalky soil tones, brioche and apple blossoms in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and still young, with excellent mid-palate depth, pinpoint bubbles, snappy acids and excellent mineral drive on the very long and still quite primary finish. This is certainly approachable today, but this wine is coiled to spring and a couple more years in the cellar will be richly rewarded, as once this wine fully blossoms from behind its excellent structural elements, it is going to be a showstopper! 2016-2035. **92+**.

**2005 Ployez-Jacquemart “Blanc de Blancs” Extra Brut Vintage (Ludes)**

The 2005 vintage of Ployez-Jacquemart Extra Brut Blanc de Blancs spent six years on the lees prior to disgorgement and a percentage of the *vins clairs* were barrel-fermented. The wine offers up an outstanding bouquet of pear, delicious apple, a touch of buttery oak, pastry cream, a lovely base of chalky soil tones, brioche and a touch of vanilla bean. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and impeccably balanced, with a fine core, very elegant *mousse*, zest acids and excellent focus and grip on the long, complex and very classy finish. Just an exceptional bottle of Blanc de Blancs. 2014-2030+. **93+**.

**2004 Corbon Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Brut Millésime (Avize) Disgorged May 2013**

As the following note will show, Claude Corbon decided to do a bit of an experiment in the large 2004 vintage, as he had enough wine to make one lot of his vintage-dated Blanc de Blancs with a bit of *battonage*. This is the non-*battoné* cuvée, which was finished with a *dosage* of six grams per liter. The wine offers up a lovely nose of apple, lemon, chalky minerality, bread dough and citrus peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and long, with a fine core, refined, frothy *mousse* and fine length and grip. Good juice. 2014-2025. **90**.

**2004 Corbon Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Brut Millésime “Battoné” (Avize) Disg May 2013**

Claude Corbon’s 2004 Blanc de Blancs bottling that had a bit of *battonage* is the same wine as above, except that it had a bit of *battonage* prior to bottling. The wine is more overtly toasty on the nose, offering up notes of wheat bread, apple, soil, plenty of nuttiness and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a good core, but lacking a bit of precision and vibrancy on the palate, from the *battonage*. The finish is equally long to the above, but the difference between the two wines is noticeable and I prefer the non-*battoné* version by a fair bit, though this is not a bad wine. 2014-2022. **88**.

**2004 Delamotte Blanc de Blancs Brut (Mesnil-sur-Oger)**

The 2004 Delamotte Blanc de Blancs was produced from grapes grown in the four grand cru villages of Mesnil, Avize, Cramant and Oger and spent eight years on the lees prior to disgorgement. The wine is fermented entirely in stainless steel and only a percentage of the *vins clairs* underwent malo in this vintage. At age ten, the wine is still very young and racy, but it has fine potential. The bouquet is a very fine blend of pear, wheat toast, chalky soil tones, plenty of smokiness, white peach and a bit of hazelnut. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and well-balanced, with a good core, fine focus, elegant *mousse* and a long, primary finish. There is still just a touch of backend bitterness here that is a sign of the youth of this wine, and a year or two in the cellar should allow the wine to fully blossom and start to hit on all cylinders. 2015-2030+. **91+**.

#### **2004 Marcel Moineaux Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime Grand Cru (Chouilly)**

The 2004 Marcel Moineaux Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime is still a bit on the tight side, but like so many of the 2004s in the last year or two, it is starting to peak out from behind its structural elements and is not too far away from starting to drink with a lot more generosity. The bouquet is a blossoming blend of pear, wheat toast, a bit of walnut, chalky soil tones and the first signs of pastry cream to come with further bottle age. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and tightly-knit, with a fine core of fruit, nascent complexity, pinpoint bubbles and a very long, snappy and mineral-driven finish. This is going to be really good when it starts to hit on all cylinders, as it is rock solid at the core and very long on the backend. But, give it still a couple of years. 2016-2030+. **92.**

#### **2002 Dom Riunart Blanc de Blancs Brut (Reims)**

The 2002 Dom Riunart Blanc de Blancs is a pretty good example of the vintage, but in their rarefied air of pricing, I was expecting a bit more. Perhaps the wine is just too young to be showing a lot in the mid-palate, as it is certainly quite structured today, offering up youthful scents of lemon peel, grapefruit, sourdough bread, chalky minerality and a touch of straw in the upper register. On the palate the wine is medium-full, tight and frothy, with a fine core, brisk, snappy acids and good length and grip on the primary finish that closes with a touch of bitterness from citrus peel flavors. This may just need cellaring to come into its own. 2018-2035+. **92.**

#### **1998 Dom Riunart Blanc de Blancs Brut (Reims)**

The 1998 Dom Riunart Blanc de Blancs is still very tightly-knit and youthful aromatic in complexion. The reticent nose reluctantly reveals scents of tart melon, bread fruit, stony minerality, bread dough and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is fullish, focused and surprisingly more open on the attack than the nose suggests, with a good core of fruit, refined *mousse*, good, bright acidity and fine length and grip on the slightly four-square finish. There is an odd juxtaposition here between the still very youthful and undeveloped aromatics and the rather wide open palate impression. Overall, the wine seems to lack just a bit of vibrancy, but perhaps I have caught it at an awkward moment of its evolution? 2014-2025+. **90.**

#### **1985 Roger Adnot Blanc de Blancs Premier Cru Extra Brut (Vertus)**

This was the first wine I have ever tasted from Roger Adnot, and while it still offered up lovely, mature aromatics, it was starting to fade on the palate and lose its structural integrity and bubbles. The bouquet is really quite lovely, offering up scents of apple, wheat toast, gentle leanness, citrus peel, a touch of smokiness and a fine base of chalky soil. However, on the palate the wine is already long in the tooth, with fleeting *mousse*, low acids and not much shape or grip. It is full-bodied and echoes the complexity of the nose, but the wine is now starting to succumb to the long reach of time and its best days are firmly in the rearview mirror. 2014-2017. **86.**

#### ***Vintage Brut***

#### **2009 Le Nombre d'Or Brut Millésime- L. Aubry Fils (Jouey-lès-Reims)**

The 2009 Le Nombre d'Or from Aubry Fils offers up an excellent nose of tart orange, stony minerality, touch of almond, warm biscuits and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and rock solid at the core, with brisk acids, pinpoint bubbles and very good mineral drive on the long, complex finish. This is quite a structured young wine, and I would be inclined to give it at least a couple of years in the cellar to really unwind and blossom. 2016-2030+. **91+.**

**2009 Ivoire & Ébène Brut Millésime- L. Aubry Fils (Jouey-lès-Reims) Disg: Sept. 2013**

The Ivoire & Ébène bottling from L. Aubry Fils is comprised of a blend of chardonnay and pinot meunier, with all the grapes for this cuvée coming from two adjacent *lieux à dits* in the village of Jouey-lès-Reims. The 2009 is excellent on both the nose and palate, wafting from the glass in a complex blend of white peach, apple, beautiful meunier floral tones, chalky soil tones, fresh-baked bread and incipient nuttiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very, very elegant, with a lovely core, crisp acids, very refined *mousse* and excellent length and grip on the focused and complex finish. I love the great balance and purity of this wine, which is already drinking beautifully, but has the depth and structure to also age very, very well. Great juice. 2014-2030. 92+.

**2009 Marc Hébrart Spécial Club Brut Premier Cru (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ) Disgorged July 2013**

Jean-Marc Hébrart makes outstanding wines and his 2009 Spécial Club bottling is outstanding. The *cépages* of the '09 is two-thirds pinot noir and one-third chardonnay, with about ten percent of the *vins clairs* for this wine barrel-fermented. This is one of the first vintage-dated bottlings I have tasted from the outstanding 2009 vintage, and if this is any indication of what is coming, then the captain is requesting that passengers fasten their seat belts, as this is a stellar wine! The deep, youthful and very classy bouquet soars from the glass in a blend of apple, tangerine, fresh-baked bread, a beautifully complex base of soil tones, a touch of hazelnut and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and still very primary, with snappy acids, excellent focus and grip, very elegant *mousse* and a very long, very refined and still fairly young finish. It is borderline criminal to be drinking this beautiful wine today, as it has a lot more to give, so try to tuck it away for at least the next three years. Brilliant juice! 2017-2035+. 94.

**2009 Vilmart Cie “Grand Cellier d’Or” Brut Premier Cru (Rilly la Montagne)**

Vilmart Cie’s “Grand Cellier d’Or” is comprised of a blend of eighty percent chardonnay and twenty percent pinot noir (from a single plot of forty-five year-old vines in the village of Rilly la Montagne), and the *vins clairs* do not go through malolactic and are aged for ten months in oak casks (a mix of older and new barrels) prior *assemblage* and its secondary fermentation. The current release spent more than four years on the lees prior to disgorgement and really is a lovely wine, offering up a complex and slightly new oaky nose of pear, apple, *crème patissière*, almond, chalky soil tones and a discreet framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and very nicely balanced, with superbly refined *mousse*, fine focus and excellent length and grip on the complex and very classy finish. I have had some bottlings from Vilmart Cie that were a bit blunt in their oak treatment, but the wood working here is very suave and understated and really adds a nice element to a very fine bottle. 2014-2030. 92.

**2008 Chartogne-Taillet Brut Millésime (Merfy) Disgorged February 2014**

Alexandre Chartogne is doing wonderful work at his family domaine on the Montagne de Reims. Having worked alongside Anselme Selosse in Avize for several years, he has clearly captured the magic and is producing absolutely splendid wines that shine with their underlying *terroir*. The 2008 Brut Millésime is comprised of a blend of sixty percent pinot noir and forty percent chardonnay and spent five years on its lees prior to disgorgement. The deep, young and very serious bouquet wafts from the glass in a fine constellation of apple, pear, fresh nutmeg, an exotic touch of clove, brioche, a marvelously complex base of soil and just a faint whisper of buttery oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, zesty and rock solid at the core, with brisk acids, great focus and grip, very refined *mousse* and a very long, soil-driven and still quite

primary finish. While the *terroir* is dramatically different than Monsieur Selosse's wines, the philosophical link here is very, very obvious, and this stunning young Champagne should be on every wine lover's shopping list! The wine is still really too young for primetime drinking, but a couple of years in the cellar are going to let this wine really start to sing, and it will be a gorgeous bottle once it fully blossoms. 2017-2035+. **94+**.

**2008 Marguet Père et Fils Grand Cru Extra Brut Millésime (Ambonnay) Disg: Sept. 2013**

The 2008 Marguet Père et Fils Brut Millésime is a stunning wine, comprised of sixty-two percent chardonnay and thirty-eight percent pinot noir. All the *vins clairs* were barrel-fermented in older Sauternes barrels (a bit smaller than a Burgundy barrel), which Benoit Marguet replaces on a ten year rotation (so the barrels tend to range from one to eleven years of age). The wine has a *dosage* of four grams per liter and is superb, delivering a complex and vibrant nose of pear, apple, a touch of butter, a lovely base of soil and a nice touch of sweet nuttiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, crisp and shows off lovely mid-palate depth, with very refined, pinpoint bubbles, excellent complexity and grip and a long, bright and focused finish. This is high class juice! 2014-2030. **92**.

**2008 Marguet Père et Fils "les Crayères" Grand Cru Brut (Ambonnay) Disg: March 2013**

The 2008 is the first vintage that Benoit Marguet has released a single vineyard bottling from les Crayères in Ambonnay, and the wine is stellar. The *cépages* is seventy percent chardonnay and thirty percent pinot noir and the wine spent four years on its lees prior to disgorgement. The great nose leaps from the glass in a mix of apple, tangerine, biscuits, a beautifully complex base of minerality, smoke and a topnote of caraway seed. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and complex, with great depth at the core, very elegant *mousse*, seamless balance and a very long, refined and vibrant finish. This is drinking very well indeed out of the blocks, but will clearly age and will be even more interesting with a handful of years in the cellar. 2014-2030+. **94**.

**2008 Moussé Fils Brut Millésime (Cuisles) Disgorged February 2013**

The 2008 Moussé Fils Brut Millésime spent a bit less than four years on its lees and went through full malolactic. This wine is very atypical of Cedric Moussé's wines, in that it is a fifty-fifty blend of pinot noir and chardonnay, as the house specializes in pinot meunier. The bouquet is really excellent, jumping from the glass in a mix of white peach, almonds, brioche, a lovely base of soil, a touch of smokiness, a whiff of wild fennel and a gentle floral topnote. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and still quite youthful, with fine mid-palate depth, frothy *mousse*, crisp acids and good, but not great length and grip on the youthful finish. This is a very good bottle that needs a bit of bottle age to blossom on the palate. If it was a bit longer on the finish, it would be stunning juice. 2016-2030. **90+**.

**2007 Pierre Callot "les Avats" Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Brut (Avize) Disg: July 2013**

Champagne Pierre Callot's "les Avats" Blanc de Blancs is a Blanc de Blancs, though this information does not appear on the label. The wine is sourced from a parcel of sixty year-old chardonnay vines that the family owns in Avize and did not undergo malolactic fermentation. The wine spent a bit more than five years on its lees prior to disgorgement and is superb, jumping from the glass in a complex aromatic constellation of white peach, pear, brioche, complex chalkiness, a touch of hazelnut and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and still quite youthful, with a superb core of fruit, brisk acids, fine focus and grip, frothy *mousse* and excellent balance on the very long and primary finish. This is going

to be lovely juice, but really deserves a year or two in the cellar to start to develop its secondary layers of complexity on the palate. It should age quite well. 2016-2030+. **92.**



*Looking down on the village center of Cumières from the vines above.*

### **2006 Marguet Père et Fils Grand Cru Brut Millésime (Ambonnay)**

The 2006 Brut Millésime from Benoit Marguet is made up of one hundred percent chardonnay, though the label does not note it as a Blanc de Blancs, with almost all of the fruit having come from Mesnil. This is from the old house style here (as witnessed by the green bottle), before Benoit made the changes to organic farming and a far more sensitive touch in the cellar and is okay bubbly, but not in the same league as the more recent releases from the estate. The bouquet offers up a complex blend of pear, apple, wheat toast, a touch of creosote (perhaps more younger barrels used in this vintage?), chalky soil tones and upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is full-bodied and a bit four-square in personality, with a good core, slightly coarse *mousse* and good, solid length and grip on the chunky, but fairly complex finish. Not bad, but light years from what Benoit is producing today! 2014-2025+. **88.**

### **2006 Marguet Père et Fils “Sapience” Premier Cru Extra Brut (Ambonnay)**

I do not know the date of disgorgement for the first vintage release of Benoit Marguet’s new organic *Tête de Cuvée*, Sapience, but I do know that the wine is absolutely magical! The wine was not produced from the family vineyards in Ambonnay, but rather from *biodynamique*-raised fruit purchased from three of Benoit’s friends in the region, as two-thirds of the blend is

chardonnay he purchased from the Agrapart brothers in Avize and one-third is pinot meunier bought from Vincent Laval in Cumières. One could do worse sourcing grapes! The wine is utterly breathtaking, wafting from the glass in a very refined aromatic blend of white peach, fresh almonds, beautiful meunier floral tones redolent of violets and delicate lavender, brioche, marvelously complex soil tones and an exotic topnote of cardamom. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and supremely elegant, with very refined *mousse*, an excellent core, zesty acidity and stunning length and grip on the complex, vibrant and very suave finish. This is probably Champagne's first *biodynamique* Prestige Cuvée, and it is a very exciting harbinger of what the future may bring in this region, when viticulture in Champagne catches up with all the good things going on in the cellars! A brilliant wine that is extremely rare and priced accordingly, but well worth the price of admission for those of comfortable means and a penchant for extremely refined bubbly. 2014-2030+. **96.**

### **2005 Ayala “Cuvée Perle d’Ayala” Brut Millésime (Aÿ) Disgorged October 2013**

This was the first time I had tasted Ayala's *Tête de Cuvée*, Perle d'Ayala. The 2005 is comprised of a blend of eighty percent chardonnay and twenty percent pinot noir and spent nine years resting *sur lies* in the Ayala cellars, under cork, rather than crown top, prior to disgorgement. The wine offers up an excellent nose of apple, pear, incipient notes of pastry cream, chalky soil tones, biscuits and a lovely topnote of spring flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still quite youthful, with a lovely core, elegant *mousse*, crisp, beautifully-integrated acids and excellent length and grip on the poised and still fairly primary finish. This is certainly approachable today, but it will clearly be even better with a year or two in the cellar and is an outstanding bottle of high class bubbly. 2016-2035. **93.**

### **2005 Cédric Bouchard “Inflorescence la Parcelle” Blanc de Noirs Brut (Celles-sur-Ource)**

The 2005 “Inflorescence la Parcelle” from Cédric Bouchard hails from the *lieu à dit* of Côte de Béchal in Celles-sur-Ource. It is comprised of one hundred percent pinot noir. Like many of the wines I have tasted from Monsieur Bouchard, the wine offers up lovely focus and complexity, with its *terroir* front and center, but with very ephemeral *mousse*. The bouquet is lovely, wafting from the glass in an elegant blend of apple, very pretty soil tones, bread dough, a touch of citrus and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very refined, with a good core, sound acids, very fleeting *mousse* and very nice length and complexity on the finish. I would like more vigorous bubbles here, but there is a lot to like in any case. 2013-2018+? **91.**

### **2005 Amour de Deutz Brut Millésime (Aÿ)**

The 2005 Amour de Deutz is a very lovely wine in the making, but it is still on the young side and will be far more compelling down the road, once its snappy structural elements have had a chance to relax a bit with bottle age. The pure and nascently complex nose wafts from the glass in a refined blend of lemon, pear, brioche, complex, chalky soil tones, lemon peel and a floral topnote redolent of apple blossoms. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, tight and rock solid at the core, with crisp acids, elegant *mousse* and a very long, focused and still primary finish. This is going to be a great drink in the fullness of time, but like so many 2005 vintage wines from the region, it is still a bit bound up in its structure and needs some cellaring. 2017-2040. **93.**

### **2005 Laherte Frères “Brut Millésime”(Chavot)**

To my palate, the Laherte family in Chavot, located just to the southwest of Épernay, is making some of the most exciting wines in all of Champagne. About three-quarters of their *vins*



*clairs* are barrel-fermented, and the wines will often show a faint influence from the oak, but it is well done and almost always subsumed in the outstanding minerality with which so many Laherte wines are infused. The 2005 Laherte Frères “Brut Millésime” has opened up a touch since I last tasted it a year ago, but like so many wines from the 2005 vintage in Champagne, this is showing very good structure now and will really benefit for some more cellaring. I could not find in my notes the exact *cépages* of the 2005, but if it mirrors the 2004, then this will be about eighty-five percent chardonnay from Chavot and fifteen percent pinot meunier from Épernay. The nose is deep, bright and youthfully complex, offering up a fine blend of pear, lemon, incipient notes of *crème patissière*, a touch of acacia, brioche, beautifully complex soil tones and just a whisper of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and racy, with great soil signature, a fine core, frothy *mousse*, excellent focus and grip and a very long, mineral-driven finish. I would still be inclined to give this another year or two in the cellar to really blossom, but it is awfully tasty already! 2016-2035. **92+**.

**2005 Ployez-Jacquemart Extra Brut Vintage (Ludes)**

The 2005 Ployez-Jacquemart Extra Brut is comprised of a blend of half chardonnay and half pinot noir and pinot meunier (the breakdown of the black grapes was not available) and the wine spent at least six years on the lees prior to disgorgement. The wine offers up a fine bouquet of apple, gentle tangerine, beautifully complex soil tones, a dollop of brioche and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and still quite youthful, with an excellent core of fruit, brisk acids, great focus and grip, refined, pinpoint bubbles and lovely bounce and nascent complexity on the very long mineral finish. This is outstanding juice, but like so many 2005 vintage-dated bottlings, it is still a bit on the young side for primetime drinking and I would tuck it away for at least a couple more years before starting to drink it. It will be stellar at its apogee. 2016-2035+. **93+**.

**2005 Vilmart et Cie “Coeur de Cuvée” Premier Cru Brut (Rilly la Montagne)**

The 2005 Vilmart et Cie “Coeur de Cuvée” is comprised of a blend of eighty percent chardonnay and twenty percent pinot noir, with all of the *vins clairs* fermented in oak barrels, with some percentage new. The wine is quite marked by its oak on both the nose and palate, but not overdone, and if one does not mind a bit of oakiness, then there is a lot to like here. The bouquet is a mix of apple, peach, brioche, almonds, nice soil tones and buttery oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a fine core, crisp acids, lovely *mousse* and a long, classy and fairly oaky finish. This wine is very well-done in its oaky style, and while the wood is very nicely handled, it is not the style of Champagne I would be reaching for with great regularity. That said, it is extremely well-made and if new oak works for you in bubbly, then this is a wine to love. 2014-2025. **91**.

**2004 Bollinger “Grande Année” Brut Millésime (Aÿ)**

The 2004 Bollinger “Grande Année” is comprised of a blend of sixty-six percent pinot noir and thirty-four percent chardonnay, with all of the *vins clairs* for this cuvée aged in older barrels. Eighty-eight percent of the blend hails from grand crus, with the remainder premier cru, and the wine is absolutely stellar. The deep and youthfully complex nose delivers a superb mix of apple, hazelnuts, fresh-baked bread, a lovely base of soil, a touch of fresh nutmeg and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and absolutely rock solid at the core, with broad shoulders, impeccable focus and balance, elegant *mousse*, snappy acids, just a touch of oak influence from the barrel aging and excellent length and grip on the powerful and still fairly primary finish. This is a young and outstanding example of the vintage, though it does

have just a touch of that old school, Bollinger oxidative quality about it as well in the mid-palate. 2018-2035+. **93+**.

**2004 Henri Goutorbe Spécial Club Brut Grand Cru (Aÿ) Disgorged October 2013**

The 2004 Henri Goutorbe Spécial Club Brut is outstanding. The wine is a blend of seventy-five percent pinot noir and twenty-five percent chardonnay and spent seven years on the fine lees prior to disgorgement. The bouquet is deep, complex and very classy, wafting from the glass in a mix of apple, wheat toast, a superbly complex base of soil and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and beautifully balanced, with a fine core of fruit, elegant *mousse*, crisp acids and outstanding focus and grip on the long and classy finish. This is drinking very well today, but will continue to improve with further bottle age. 2014-2030+. **92+**.

**2004 Pierre Paillard Brut Millésime Grand Cru (Bouzy) Disgorged December 2013**

The 2004 Pierre Paillard Brut Millésime is a fifty-fifty blend of pinot noir and chardonnay, all from vines in excess of thirty-five years of age in the grand cru village of Bouzy, and the wine spent eight years on its lees prior to disgorgement. Though the wine is labeled as Brut, in reality, this is an Extra Brut, as the *dosage* is only 3.5 grams per liter. The wine offers up a lovely bouquet of apple, warm bread, tart orange, very complex minerality and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and still quite primary, with a rock solid core, brisk acids, pinpoint bubbles and excellent length and grip on the very minerally and still very young finish. This wine is excellent, but it still needs some bottle age to blossom from behind its racy structural elements and really start to hit on all cylinders. 2017-2035. **92**.

**2002 Bollinger R.D. Brut (Aÿ)**

The 2002 Bollinger R.D. is the finest young vintage of this bottling that I have ever had the pleasure to taste. The nose is still fairly tight and youthful, but also deep and pure, wafting from the glass in a mélange of tart orange, apple, stony minerality, sourdough bread, caraway seed, smokiness and a nice topnote of white flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and nascently complex, with a rock solid core, utterly refined *mousse*, crisp acids and stellar length and grip on the perfectly balanced and very refined finish. I love the synthesis here of the depth and ripe purity of the 2002 vintage and the very tightly-knit and precise structural chassis of the wine. A beautiful wine in the making, the 2002 Bollinger R.D. is certainly drinkable today, but it will really blossom with three or four more years of bottle age. 2014-2035+. **95+**.

**2002 Hubert Paulet “Cuvée Risléus” Brut Millésime Premier Cru (Rilly-la-Montagne)**

The 2002 Hubert Paulet “Cuvée Risléus” is a promising bottle of wine that shows some influence of barrel fermentation, but also great mineral drive and precision. The very good bouquet wafts from the glass in a blend of apple, tangerine, fresh-baked bread, complex soil tones, a bit of hazelnut and some toastiness from the barrels. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nascently complex, but still quite young and primary, with a fine core of fruit, very slightly coarse bubbles, crisp, beautifully-integrated acids and excellent length and grip on the promising finish. This is very promising juice, but it will need some time to fully blossom 2016-2030. **91+**.

**2002 Piper-Heidsieck “Rare” Brut (Reims)**

It has been a year since I last tasted the 2002 Piper-Heidsieck Rare and the wine remains absolutely stunning. The nose with an additional year’s worth of bottle age is starting to get a touch toastier in profile, but is still complex and multi-faceted in its blend of apple, pear, pastry cream, fresh-baked bread, a very complex and classy base of soil, citrus zest, a hint of vanilla

bean and a topnote of white lilies. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and very elegant, with very refined *mousse*, excellent mid-palate depth, crisp acids, great focus and balance and a very long, complex and vibrant finish. This superb Champagne has reached cruising altitude and should continue to drink beautifully for another couple of decades, at least. A beautiful wine. 2014-2035+. **95+**.



*Overlooking the River Marne from mid-slope in the vineyard of Clos des Goisses.*

**1999 Ployez-Jacquemart “Liesse d’Harbonville” Brut Millésime (Ludes) Disgorged 10/2013**

The 1999 Ployez-Jacquemart “Liesse d’Harbonville” is its customary blend of seventy percent chardonnay and thirty percent pinot noir, with all of the *vins clairs* barrel-fermented and aged for six months in the cellars in two and three year-old barrels. The wine does not undergo malolactic fermentation and is aged for more than twelve years on the lees prior to disgorgement. The 1999 bottling offers up a deep and very classy nose of pear, delicious apple, buttery overtones from the oak, brioche, *crème patissière*, complex minerality, a bit of hazelnut and a topnote of gentle smokiness. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and very racy (from its non-malo personality), with a great core of fruit, broad shoulders (from the ’99 vintage’s ripeness), very refined *mousse* and stunning complexity on the very long, poised and perfectly balanced finish. The ripeness of 1999 is mostly felt here in terms of the breadth of the attack and the rock solid nature of the wine in the mid-palate, but I also get the sense that this fine vintage of Liesse d’Harbonville will mature on a faster track than wines such as the 1995 or 1996, and

will probably be at its apogee within the next three or four years. It is a stellar example of the '99 vintage. 2016-2025+. **95.**

**1990 Bollinger R.D. Brut (Aÿ)**

The 1990 Bollinger R.D. is drinking very well at age twenty-four, offering up a deep and complex bouquet of peach, gentle notes of honeycomb, wheat toast, a complex base of soil, plenty of smokiness and a topnote of orange peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with a fine core of fruit, refined *mousse*, excellent acidity, just a hint of the oxidation that is soon to arrive, and fine length and grip on the focused and classy finish. Unless one is really a fan of the oxidative side of old Champagne, this is probably a very good time to be drinking up the 1990 Bollinger R.D., for thought its lovely acidity is going to carry it for many more years to come, it is going to show the first signs of maderization in the not too distant future. But, for drinking over the relative near-term, this is still a lovely glass of bubbly. 2013-2025+. **93.**

***Vintage Brut Rosé***

**2009 Marguet Père et Fils Brut Rosé Grand Cru (Ambonnay) Disgorged Sept. 2013**

The 2009 Marguet Père et Fils Brut Rosé is actually an Extra Brut bottling (I cannot recall if there is even a designation on the front label), as its *dosage* is 4.8 grams per liter. The *cépages* is eighty-four percent chardonnay and sixteen percent pinot noir and the wine is spectacular, soaring from the glass in a mélange of *fraises du bois*, orange zest, complex, chalky soil tones, gentle smokiness and a lovely topnote of cinnamon. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and supremely elegant, with an ethereal and dancing personality, lovely mid-palate depth, utterly refined *mousse* and exceptional length and grip on the perfectly balanced and classy finish. Great, great juice from Benoit Marguet! 2014-2035. **94.**

**2005 Hubert Paulet Brut Rosé Millésime Premier Cru (Rilly-la-Montagne)**

The 2005 Hubert Paulet Brut Rosé is a lovely wine, offering up a deep and complex nose of strawberries, cherries, rye bread, a lovely base of soil, dried rose petals and a topnote of smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and nicely balanced, with just a touch of coarseness to its *mousse*, but a lovely core and fine length and grip on the focused and zesty finish. This is done by the *saignée* method, with a bit of skin contact, rather than making a white Champagne and adding a bit of still red wine to add color, and consequently it is a bit more vinous in style and really works best at table. A very good bottle that will be even better with a year or two of bottle age. 2015-2030+. **91.**