

VIEW FROM THE CELLAR

By John Gilman

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CUNÉ'S MARVELOUS CONTINO ESTATE SETTING THE TABLE FOR SINGLE VINEYARD RIOJA



Looking out of the picture window at Contino at the beautiful amphitheater of vines that run right up to the winery.

Cuné, or officially, the Compañía Vinícola del Norte de España (the acronym of which C.V.N.E. eventually became known to Rioja lovers as Cuné) has been based in the Barrio de la Estación in Haro since 1879. Along with its neighbors, López de Heredia, La Rioja Alta and Bodegas Riojanas, Cuné is one of the great old classicists in the region and can date back their history to the start of the modern era in Rioja that began in the last quarter century of the nineteenth century. While most of the wines produced here are made in the gorgeous winery in Haro, Cuné also owns another winery- though it is in effect a separate estate- their great Viñedos del Contino property, which is located outside of the village of Laserna in the Rioja Alavesa region. Contino was originally founded in 1973, as a joint project between Cuné and the vineyard owners here. Cuné had long purchased the grapes from the owners of this sixty-two hectare estate, and in the early 1970s, the two formed a partnership that would lead to another winery under the Cuné umbrella. In 2013, Cuné bought out their vineyard partners of the last forty years at Contino and acquired sole ownership of this iconic estate. The unique microclimate of this sector of Rioja Alavesa has allowed the winery to create its own style and personality

since its formation as an independent entity, and today Contino is an independent branch of the Cuné wine constellation, with its own rich historical legacy of fine wines since the inaugural vintage of 1974.

Victor Urrutia Ybarra, the Managing Director of Cuné was in New York in October of this year to help host a superb vertical Contino dinner that was organized by Mannie Berk of The Rare Wine Company and which I was very fortunate to be invited to attend. Contino was one of the very first “single vineyard” wines produced in all of Rioja when it was first launched in the 1974 vintage, as of course, the traditions in Rioja had always been for blending from a wide variety of different vineyards and often, different sub-regions of Rioja to produce various cuvées. As was the thinking at the same time in places like Barolo and Champagne, it was axiomatic that a more complete and complex wine could be made from a judicious blend of several different *terroirs* when it came to great, classical Rioja. With the launch of Contino in 1974, this premise was put to the test. Ever since its inception, Contino has been envisioned as a slightly more modern style of Rioja to augment and diversify the traditional lineup of Cuné, but in my experience, it has always been a slightly modern-styled Rioja that pays proper homage to the traditions of Rioja and has both its feet firmly planted in the rich historical legacy of this region. Since 1973, the winery has called home to a two hundred year-old farmhouse that sits above the cellars and in the middle of the beautiful bowl of vineyards. Today, production at Contino ranges from one hundred and fifty to two hundred thousand bottles, depending on the year, as selection is always very strict for wines that will appear under the Contino label, and there have actually been a few years where no wines at all were produced at Contino, including, 1977, 1992 and 1993.

Since its inception in 1973, Contino had been managed by the very talented father and son team of José and Jesús de Madrazo up until a couple of years ago. José de Madrazo Real de Asúa was Cuné’s General Manager of Viña Real (dating back to the 1960s) and a member of the board at the time that the Contino winery was formed, and he was in charge of creating the Contino estate and winery in its very earliest days. José de Madrazo had become convinced over the years of the unique quality of the fruit from Contino, and though it had been an important building block for the Viña Real for many decades by this time, he persuaded the board at Cuné that this was a wine that should be allowed to stand on its own and the Contino partnership was created. The Madrazos had managed this property since it first opened its doors in 1973, with Jesús de Madrazo also serving as the Technical Director at the winery since 1999. José de Madrazo Real de Asúa passed away a few years ago, in fact, within a month of my releasing my historical feature on Cuné back at the end of 2014, but his son Jesús de Madrazo continued to run the estate with great élan up until very recently. Jesús de Madrazo decided in 2016 that he would like to spend more time with his family (and perhaps make a small bit of Rioja with his wife) and left Contino after the 2016 harvest and initial fermentations of the wines from that vintage. His successor is Jorge Navascués, who hails originally from the region of Aragon and worked with Jesús de Madrazo in 2016, finishing those wines in the cellars and overseeing their bottling. The 2017 vintage is Señor Navascués’ first vintage at the helm of Contino, but Jesús de Madrazo came back to consult during this harvest, just to be handy if any questions popped up, so that the continuity of the estate’s wines could continue nicely from one generation of winemaker to the next. Based on the couple of 2017s we tasted from Contino at our vertical tasting here in New

York, Jorge Navascués is off to a flying start at the estate and the future seems to be in very, very good hands at Contino!

The Contino vineyards surround the winery on a bend of the Ebro River, on a superb alluvial soil base of chalk, sand and clay. About forty percent of the vineyards contain a fairly high concentration of limestone, with the small white stones very much in evidence on the surface as one walks through the vines. In the very earliest days at Contino in the mid-1970s, the wines were made by Cuné's winemaker, Basilio Izquierdo, who would shuttle back and forth between the cellars in Haro and those at Contino. José de Madrazo had directed the winery since the start, but he was not a full-time winemaker in those early days. When Jesús de Madrazo first joined Cuné in 1995, it was as an assistant winemaker to Señor Izquierdo at both Cuné and Contino, and in 1999, he became the first winemaker in the family firm to be dedicated solely to the wines at Contino. The years from 1999 until 2016, when Jesús de Madrazo was head of the estate and making the wines here was a golden chapter for this relatively-hidden gem in the Cuné portfolio of great wines, as almost all fans of great, classic Rioja know very well the Imperial and Viña Real bottlings from Cuné, but the equally stellar Contino wines are much more of an insider's wine in the firmament of classical Rioja. As I mentioned above, when Contino was first envisioned, it was thought that this might be a more modern wine to add to the lineup of great wines at Cuné, offering an expression of a singular and great *terroir* that was not aged as long in the cellars prior to bottling and release and would retain its own, particular expression of Rioja. Long-time Spanish wine specialist Gerry Dawes has written in the past that "Contino is the only great, modern-styled Rioja produced in the region" and he singled out the 2001 Contino "Viña del Olivo" bottling as "undoubtedly the greatest red wine I have tasted in the so-called modern era of Spanish winemaking."

I agreed with Gerry's sentiments regarding the modern styling of Contino to a certain degree leading into this tasting in October, but my thoughts have changed a bit after savoring sixteen vintages of various Contino bottlings over the course of this evening. Part of the reason for my slight change of thought on Contino is that the October tasting was perhaps the first time that I have drunk a selection of Contino bottlings on their own, without having Imperial, Viña Real or some of the López de Heredia, Bodegas Riojanas or La Rioja Alta bottlings also in the tasting lineup. Savoring a range of solely Continos allowed the style of the wine to stand on its own and pulled into focus my impressions of this beautiful *terroir* and its wines. On one hand, Contino is certainly a wine that gravitates more towards the modern camp of Rioja than do the utterly classical, blended styles of Imperial and Viña Real, but there are also some very important stylistic differences from the Contino wines and others in the modern camp of Rioja. Yes, Contino is a wine from a single vineyard, which is quite a modernist step in Rioja (and was downright revolutionary in 1974!), and the wine is aged in a mix of different oak sources (seventy percent French casks, twenty percent American oak and ten percent Hungarian barrels), rather than the traditional, one hundred percent American casks of old school Rioja. Additionally, as the beautiful horseshoe-shaped vineyard of Contino is a warm, classic Rioja Alavesa microclimate, it tends to produce wines that seem a bit more robust in personality out of the blocks than many of the more classically-inclined bottlings in the region and had previously cemented it in my mind as one of the more modernist wines of Rioja for this reason.

However, coming out of this recent tasting, I hope I have refined my thinking about Contino a bit and now would not necessarily rank it in the modernist camp in Rioja, for a number of reasons. First, though Contino is a fairly broad-shouldered example of Rioja out of the blocks, due to the discussion above of its Rioja Alavesa microclimate, it is a far less extracted wine than some of the more clearly modernist interpretations of Rioja such as the Roda wines and their like. While it is still too early to have a sense of how the relatively new Roda wines (to name just one of the most famous of the modernists in the region, but this discussion could apply to any of the other top examples) will eventually evolve into with the passage of time- remember, this is Rioja and even modern-styled wines take several decades to really start to blossom fully and show their true personalities- my gut instinct is that the Contino wines will always show their more gently-extracted personalities than is the case with the more overtly modernist school, and that is much more in line with the traditionalist camp in Rioja than it is with the modernists. This classical sense of extraction was very much in evidence in our October vertical of the wines of Contino and was particularly striking when we got back a couple of decades of bottle age in the wines. The more robust personality of younger Contino bottlings faded away to a significant degree with the passage of time, and eventually, one comes to find a wine that faithfully represents its underlying and unique sense of *terroir*, but very much within the framework of what I would consider a classical, old school Rioja stylistic sensibility, viewed through the prism of the Rioja Alavesa sub-region. I do not yet anticipate that there will be a similar defining element of place and sub-region in the more extracted and equally muscular style of the top modernists- though to be fair, the jury is still out on that question and it will still be a good decade more before we really start to see whether this is the case or not.



Another element of Contino that had me initially placing these wines at least on the periphery of the modernist camp was the use of oak cooperage in the *elevage* of the various bottlings at the winery. As I mentioned above, Contino has always had French oak casks as part of its recipe for barrel aging, and though this has evolved a bit over the years, the French wood has been an intimate part of the personality of the wine since the first vintage of 1974. In the earliest days, say for the first decade and a half, give or take a vintage or two, the oak regimen at Contino was to raise the various bottlings in a fifty-fifty mix of French and American oak barrels, but with none of the casks ever new wood. Probably since the time that Jesús de Madrazo took over full-time as the Technical Director at Contino in 1999, the oak palette has been shifted a bit at the estate to include a higher percentage of French wood, with the amount of American oak casks diminishing. In addition, there is also now a very small percentage of new oak used for the Contino bottlings, as the barrels are on a ten year rotation plan, so that effectively, ten percent are new each year. However, though the origin of the oak leaning more and more to France would seem to put Contino again into the modernist camp, the use of the oak is quite different from many modernists, with a much lower percentage of new oak used and the wood not supplying any of the structural chassis of tannin in the wines of Contino. With many of the more modern school in Rioja, one gets the sense that the oak tannins are a very important component in the overall structure of the wine, and here again is a point of separation between Contino and true modernists in Rioja. As Victor Urrutia stated at our tasting, “when it comes to oak, it is very important to buy the best possible quality for your barrels, and then make sure not to let them influence the wine too much during the aging.”

Consequently, we have a couple of key differences between true modernists in Rioja and Contino, and as this was so eloquently displayed at our vertical tasting, I began to realize that I had been incorrect in grouping Contino in with the other top estates in the modernist camp in Rioja. Similarly, though the time of aging in casks at Contino is far shorter than is the case for Reservas and Gran Reservas of Imperial and Viña Real (Contino wines will seldom go longer than twenty-four months in barrel prior to bottling, other than the rare Gran Reserva, which spend three years in cask), they emerge from the cellars here far more ready to drink than is the case with a younger release of a wine from a modernist estate such as Roda. They are still emphatically young wines when a new vintage is sent out into the pipeline from the winery at Contino, but there is already a sense of balance and harmonious equilibrium that makes them quite approachable in their youth (witness just how delicious the newly-minted 2017 Contino “Viña del Olivo” is out of the blocks!) and this again sets them apart from the greater modernist crowd. So, upon reflection in the afterglow of this marvelous vertical tasting, I have come to the conclusion that the wines at Contino are modern really only in their sense of place and their expression of fidelity to the underlying *terroir* of their sixty-two hectares of vines that make up this beautiful horseshoe of a vineyard, but within this shared expression of *terroir*, they are really far more classic expressions of Rioja Alavesa than they are modern examples of Rioja.

There are some old vine parcels here at Contino, with the oldest vineyards now more than sixty-five years of age, but the average for the whole of the sixty-two hectares on the estate is quite a bit younger at around thirty years-old, as many of the vineyards are now just starting to enter their primes. Everything on the estate has been hand-picked since day one at Contino. At the outset, there was only a single wine produced at Contino, which was their Rioja Reserva bottling. It has only been produced in good vintages, so for example, there was no wine at all

produced under the Contino label here in 1977, 1979, 1992 or the 1993 vintages, as the quality was deemed simply not up to the high standards of the estate. The Contino Reserva is today made up of a blend of eighty-five percent Tempranillo, ten percent Graciano, three percent Mazuela and two percent Garnacha. The wine is fermented primarily in epoxy-lined cement fermentations tanks, but there are also some stainless steel tanks, as well as a few very large, wooden, one hundred hectoliter vats in the winery to complement the stainless steel and cement. After its alcoholic fermentation, the Reserva bottling undergoes its malolactic fermentation in the cement vats, and the wine spends twenty-four months in barrel prior to being racked and bottled. As Jesús de Madrazo noted when I visited him at the estate a few years back, “there are a few stainless steel vats that the wine can undergo its malo in, if we run out of space in the cement vats, and there is occasionally a cask of either the Viña de Olivo or Graciano that will be blended in that have undergone their malo in barrel, but the Reserva is essentially a wine that undergoes malolactic in cement tank, rather than barrel.” As I mentioned above, the oak aging regimen for the wines at Contino has evolved over time, with the first early vintages raised in a fifty-fifty blend of French and American oak casks, and by the time I was writing my historical feature on Cuné and Contino back in the autumn of 2014, the mix had shifted for the Contino Reserva to sixty percent French casks and forty percent American oak. But, as I mentioned earlier in the article, this has yet been refined a bit more in recent vintages, amounting to the new mix of seventy percent French, twenty percent American and ten percent Hungarian oak barrels in the rotation.

The lineup of wines here has grown over the years, as for the first twenty years of the winery, Contino only produced their Rioja Reserva. Today, the winery produces essentially six wines: Contino Rioja Reserva Red and White (the Blanco having first been commercially released in the 2009 vintage), Contino Gran Reserva in top vintages, as well as the single parcel Rioja bottling of Viña del Olivo and single varietal bottlings of both Graciano and Garnacha. There is a tiny amount of Contino Rosado produced here, but it is generally kept at the winery for official functions and “family” uses and is not commercially available. The Graciano varietal bottling today is crafted from fruit grown exclusively on a five hectare parcel of Graciano grapes in the San Gregorio Grande parcel that were planted in 1979. The first vintage of Contino Graciano produced from this 1979 plantation was in 1994, which was released as a Reserva after spending the requisite twenty-four months aging in barrel. As Jesús de Madrazo recalled during my visit to Contino in October of 2014, regarding the Graciano cuvée, “the first two vintages of 1994 and 1995 Graciano were produced as Reservas and raised with the same oak treatment that we used for the Rioja Reserva (a fifty-fifty blend of French and American oak at that time, with none of it new), but I came to realize that this was too much oak for a mono-varietal bottling.” He continues, “from many early tastings with my father and Basilio, we came to realize that we wanted more fruit character to show through for the Graciano, so we started to reduce the amount of time that this wine spent in barrel- first twenty months, then eighteen months, and finally we settled on the fifteen months we currently use for the Graciano.” Consequently, the Graciano can no longer be labeled as Reserva, as it does not spend two years in cask. As the team at Contino developed a bit of history with their Graciano, they also realized that the varietal did not take as well to the American oak as it did to the French wood, and so today, the wine is raised in eighty to ninety percent French barrels and the remainder in a mix of Hungarian and Russian oak.

Since the formation of the Contino estate in 1973, the Madrazo family was instrumental in championing one of the traditional grapes of Rioja on the property, Graciano, which had fallen into eclipse in the 1970s and 1980s and was nearly gone from most vineyards in Rioja by the 1990s. This is despite the variety having been an important blending grape in Rioja since the nineteenth century. But, Graciano is a fickle grape to grow (at our vertical tasting, Victor Urrutia quipped that its name Graciano is often jokingly translated in Spanish as Gracias Non or “no thank you!” due to its capricious nature in the vineyards). At Contino, though Tempranillo is of course still the predominant grape, with fifty of the sixty-two hectares of vines on the estate planted to this variety, fully seven hectares of vineyard land are committed to Graciano today. Graciano is a very important blending grape in Rioja in general, and this is particularly true in a warmer microclimate such as the Rioja Alavesa and in the growing problem of global warming. This is because Graciano can add a beautiful spine of acidity to a red wine here, as it retains its acidity beautifully and really can be seen as the source of much of the bouncy vibrancy that defines the various blended bottlings at Contino that include this varietal in the cuvée. It is a grape that is particularly well-suited to warmer microclimates where Tempranillo can end up a bit soft and overripe, and Contino has been one of the biggest proponents of Graciano since the mid-1970s and the grapes slight renaissance in Rioja today can be directly linked to its championing by the Madrazo family at Contino back in the day.



Mannie Berk of The Rare Wine Company and Victor Urrutia of Cuné and Contino at our October tasting.

The single varietal bottling of Garnacha is a much more recent phenomenon than the Graciano cuvée at Contino, having only been first produced in the 2008 vintage. The wine is produced in very small quantities (the 2010 vintage only produced twenty-eight hundred bottles) and is raised entirely in one wine barrels. The casks are the five hundred liter barrels that Jésus de Madrazo used initially for his Contino Blanco Reserva, so they have been nicely seasoned prior to the Garnacha calling them home for a year and a half in the cellars prior to bottling. I have only had a couple of vintages of the Contino Garnacha over the years and we did not have any in our vertical tasting in October, but I have very much liked what I have tasted in the past and certainly recommend the wine. Like the Graciano that is planted on the property, the Garnacha here is also an important component for the blended bottlings at Contino such as the Reserva and the like, and though the single varietal bottling is very, very good, perhaps this grape's key role in the blended wines is its most important contribution at Contino. However, while both Graciano and Garnacha get their own individual bottlings at Contino, it is interesting to note that after Tempranillo, the most widely planted red grape at the estate is Mazuelo, which is also in integral part of the blended cuvées.

The Contino Gran Reserva bottling is only produced in top vintages, and in fact, has only been crafted in about a dozen vintages over the history (to date) of the estate. It is made from an old vine selection in the finest vintages, with its *cépages* fluctuating a bit depending on how each grape variety excels in a given vintage, though the heart and soul of the cuvée each year is the Tempranillo from the Las Anchas parcel of vines on the estate, which, at sixty-five years of age and are the oldest vineyards that are cultivated at Contino. The blend usually includes at least seventy percent of this old vine Tempranillo, with the balance of the *cépages* comprised of Graciano and Garnacha. For example, in the 2005 vintage, the wine is seventy percent Tempranillo, fifteen percent each of the other two varietals, but in the previous year, the blend was seventy-five percent Tempranillo, fifteen percent Graciano and ten percent Garnacha. The wines all undergo their primary fermentation in cement, and then malo in French oak barrels. After malo is completed, they are racked off into a combination of French, Hungarian and American small barrels (225 liters), none of which are new, for their period of barrel aging. Contino Gran Reserva spends three years in barrel, with traditional racking every six months during its *elevage*, and then is given further bottle aging prior to release. In the most recent vintage of Gran Reserva, the just released and utterly superb 2012, one can see very clearly that this is a wine crafted for very long-term cellaring and it will need plenty of further aging before it really starts to hit on all cylinders. In fact, in the last decade or so, the Gran Reserva has been bottled more and more often in magnums or other larger formats, to further enhance the wine's ability to age very long and gracefully.

The single parcel bottling of Viña del Olivo, which takes its name from the one thousand year-old olive tree that sits in the heart of this amphitheater of a vineyard, comes from a filet section of *terroir* which is planted to ninety percent Tempranillo and ten percent Graciano. The cuvée that bears the name of the ancient olive tree is made from a selection of the very best parcels of grapes in a given year from this core section of the Contino vineyard. Like the single varietal Graciano bottling, the Viña del Olivo is initially fermented in huge, one hundred hectoliter wooden vats, with the malolactic taking place in new French barrels and then the young wine is aged in 225 liter oak barrels of French, Hungarian and American origins. It spends a couple of months longer in barrel prior to bottling than the single varietal wines, usually

seventeen or eighteen months, and then is also given a year in the cellar of bottle aging prior to release. As its aging regiment does not meet the two year minimum to be labeled as Reserva, it is bottled simply under the Viña del Olivo name, but it is one of the top two wines produced at Contino. Like the Gran Reserva, it too is only made in very top quality vintages, with the inaugural commercial vintage of Viña del Olivo having been produced in 1996 (there were experimental Viña del Olivo bottlings made in both 1994 and 1995, but they were kept in house for “family consumption”). This bottling is usually comprised of a blend of ninety percent Tempranillo and ten percent Graciano, though as readers will see below, five percent of Mazuelo found its way into the 2017 version and perhaps this will continue to be one of the building blocks for the Viño del Olivo on into the future as Señor Navascués settles in at the winemaking helm at Contino.

In my experience, all of the various Contino blended bottlings of red wines tend to start out life as fairly black fruity examples of Rioja, but this is also pretty true of most of the other Rioja Alavesa bottlings with which I am familiar. Obviously, the single varietal bottlings of Graciano and Garnacha are more red fruity than the other Contino wines out of the blocks. However, with sufficient bottle age, all of the Contino wines tend to turn to more red fruity personalities, and this is often one of the ways to tell if a vintage is really starting to reach its plateau of maturity and drink well is if the fruit has made the transition over to the red fruit side of the ledger. They all also tend to be nicely “meaty” examples of Rioja when they are ready to drink, with the original black fruit tones having moved towards raspberries and red cherries, the spice tones mixing in elements of Rioja clove notes with plenty of *garrigue*, and a smoky element of cigar smoke often coming to the fore. The soil signatures in all of these wines is also fairly unique in Rioja, as it tends to get quite autumnal and, as Victor Urrutia noted, “Contino is probably our most Burgundian wine in that the soil is often expressed in terms of *sous bois* when the wines are fully mature.” As I mentioned above, the wines all tend to start out with pretty broad shoulders by Rioja standards, but with sufficient bottle age, this aspect is far less present and they tend to settle into a beautiful, velvety maturity in which the underlying *terroir* of this amphitheater of vines is beautifully expressed. And they are long-lived wines, offering accessibility around age ten to twelve, really starting to properly blossom at age twenty, but not reaching their apogees of peak maturity until they are fully thirty years of age. At which point, they still offer forty to fifty years more of potential longevity!

As I included a full history of the Contino estate and its various bottlings of in the feature on Cuné back in Issue 54, I will point subscribers there if they wish to know even a bit more about each individual bottling of Contino and more of the history of Rioja’s first single vineyard wines. Of the notes that appear below, all these wines were tasted with Victor Urrutia Ybarra and Mannie Berk of The Rare Wine Company here in New York in mid-October of this year. Our tasting here in New York began with the new vintage releases of Contino Blanco Reserva and Graciano, followed by a verticals of Viño del Olivo and Gran Reserva, and culminated with a couple of old vintages of the Contino Reserva bottling, including the debut vintage of 1974. I have listed the wines below in the order they were served at the tasting. One can find further notes on previous Contino wines that I have tasted when I visited the property in October of 2014 in that same article back in Issue 54. Contino is one of the great wines in the firmament of Rioja, with perhaps more of a “Burgundian” heart than many other great Rioja wines, due to its various cuvées all hailing from a single vineyard, whereas other top Cuné wines which find their

stylistic sensibilities from a great blending touch, spread over a far wider range of different vineyards and their respective *terroirs*. But, as I tried to reflect upon above, in due course, the very classical underpinning of old school Rioja seems to come to the fore with the wines from Contino, and though it may have been one of the first single vineyard wines produced in the region, it does truly seem to have simply grafted the concept of a wine of a singular *terroir* to the very deep roots of great, old school Rioja.

2017 Rioja Blanco Reserva- Viñedos del Contino (Rioja Alavesa)

The 2017 Rioja Blanco Reserva from Contino is composed of a blend of ninety percent Viura and ten percent Garnacha Blanco. The wine is raised half in stainless steel and the other half in new casks for ten months, with ninety percent of the barrels being made of French oak and the other ten percent being acacia wood, after which the two components are blended in anticipation of bottling. The 2017 comes in at 13.5 percent octane and offers up a beautiful nose of lemon, white peach, salty soil tones, a touch of green olive, orange peel and a dollop of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is crisp, ripe and full-bodied, with a fine core, lovely soil signature and impressive length and grip on the balanced and quite vibrant finish. Lovely juice that will age very well indeed. 2019-2040. **92**.

2016 Graciano- Viñedos del Contino (Rioja Alavesa)

There are only five thousand bottles a year of Graciano produced at Contino, which made its debut as a single varietal bottling in the 1994 vintage. This bottling sees its malolactic fermentation take place in new French barrels and then the wine is placed in a mix of ninety percent French oak and ten percent Hungarian oak casks for ten months of aging, with all of the casks new. It is very interesting that despite the wine being raised entirely in new oak, the Contino Graciano does not seem to really show the wood influence all that much. The 2016 version comes in at fourteen percent octane and offers up a fine bouquet of cherries, plums, clove-like spice tones, cigar wrapper, a lovely base of soil and a deft framing of new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, ripe and tangy (as is always the case with Graciano), with a lovely core, modest tannins and a complex, soil-driven and gently warm finish. Though this is the same octane as the Viño del Olivo 2016, the Graciano shows its heat just a whisper on the backend, whereas the Viño del Olivo does not. This will be a lovely wine with a bit of bottle age, though it is certainly already approachable today. 2019-2050. **92+**.

Viño del Olivo

I am torn as to whether the Viño del Olivo or the Gran Reserva is the finest bottling produced at Contino, and it is probably a debate that will not be settled for several more decades. I suspect that ultimately, it will come down to what one looks for in a great, single vineyard example of Rioja, as the Viño del Olivo spends less time in cask during its elevage, and so the terroir here is presented differently than in the Gran Reserva, which spends fully three years in barrel prior to bottling.

2017 Rioja “Viño del Olivo”- Viñedos del Contino (Rioja Alavesa)

The 2017 vintage is one that was generally devastated by frosts in Rioja, but happily, the vineyard of Contino in Rioja Alavesa was almost completely spared and the following cool growing season has really allowed the underlying *terroir* here to shine. The result is one of the most beautiful and elegant young vintages of Contino Viño del Olivo that I have ever tasted and

this is clearly going to be one of the greatest vintages of this bottling in the last twenty years. The *cépages* this year was eighty-five percent Tempranillo, ten percent Graciano and five percent Mazuelo, and the wine finished at 13.3 percent octane. The bouquet is a beautiful blend of red and black cherries, cigar smoke, lovely spice tones, a superb base of soil, a touch of smoked meats and a fine foundation of oak nuances. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very transparent out of the blocks, with a fine core, excellent focus and grip, ripe, seamless tannins and a long, beautifully balanced finish. This is the most elegant and soil-driven young example of Viño del Olivo that I have ever tasted and it will be magical in due course. 2025-2075. **94+**.

2016 Rioja “Viño del Olivo”- Viñedos del Contino (Rioja Alavesa)

The 2016 Viño del Olivo is more traditionally styled (as I think of this bottling when young) than the 2017, as this is a hot year in Rioja Alavesa, with the fruit at Contino brought in before autumn rains played havoc with the backend of the harvest. The 2016 is its typical fourteen percent alcohol and composed in this vintage of a blend of ninety percent Tempranillo and ten percent Graciano. The wine is more black fruity and muscular in personality out of the blocks than the 2017, offering up a youthfully complex nose of black cherries, dark berries, cigar smoke, a fine base of soil and a nice framing of both cedary and coconutty oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely plump at the core, with good soil signature, ripe, well-integrated tannins and a long, nascently complex and quite promising finish. This too has excellent promise. 2025-2075. **93**.

2010 Rioja “Viño del Olivo”- Viñedos del Contino (Rioja Alavesa)

The 2010 vintage is a great, classic vintage in Rioja, as it was characterized by a cool spring and then a long, even and not particularly hot growing season. Harvest at Contino was at the end of September in this year and the Viño del Olivo was composed of a blend of ninety percent Tempranillo and ten percent Graciano in this vintage. Like the 2016 version, the wine still came in fairly ripe, tipping the scales at a surprisingly well-managed 14.4 percent and offering up a bouquet that is really starting to blossom beautifully today, redolent of black cherries, a touch of *garrigue*, spices meats, a complex base of soil tones, cigar smoke and cedar. On the palate the wine is ripe, deep and nicely broad-shouldered, with a superb core of fruit, lovely soil elements, resolving tannins and a long, robust and very complex backend. This is starting to show some lovely secondary elements on both the nose and palate, but still is in need of further bottle age to let those tannins soften up a bit more on the finish and the wine really start to hit on all cylinders. It is going to be superb. 2023-2075. **92+**.

2007 Rioja “Viño del Olivo”- Viñedos del Contino (Rioja Alavesa)

The 2007 vintage at Contino was one of ideal conditions, with plenty of water accumulation during a surprisingly snowy winter getting everything set for the summer. The growing season was slightly warmer than normal, but without scorching days, and the last month leading into harvest was cooler than normal, with particularly cool nights allowing for acidities to stay nicely high and sugar accumulations to mount slowly and evenly. The Viño del Olivo is a blend of eighty-eight percent Tempranillo and twelve percent Graciano this year and comes in just a whisper over fourteen percent octane in '07. The wine is starting to blossom nicely at age twelve, with some of its red fruity elements emerging on the nose of red and black raspberries, spices meats, cigar smoke, wild fennel, cedar and a lovely base of autumnal soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, ripe and well-balanced, with a good core of fruit, but not quite the same complexity of flavors that the nose is showing today. The finish is long, modestly tannic and blossoming nicely, but the wine does not seem to have quite the same precision as

most of these other vintages of Viño del Olivo. Perhaps this is just the last vestiges of adolescence? 2019-2050+. **90+?**

2004 Rioja “Viño del Olivo”- Viñedos del Contino (Rioja Alavesa) served from magnum

The 2004 vintage at Contino is one of the later harvests in recent times, as some rain during the month of August delayed ripening and picking did not commence here until September 29th in this year, finishing mid-October. The Viño del Olivo in '04 ended up being composed of eighty-five percent Tempranillo and fifteen percent Graciano, with the alcohol coming in at 14.1 percent. This is one of my favorite vintages of the cuvée and it is starting to really drink well today (even out of magnum), offering up a deep and complex nose of red and black cherries, Cuban cigar wrapper, a gorgeous base of soil tones, cedar and a topnote of Contino spice elements that are like a cross of *garrigue* and the clove elements found in so many examples from the Rioja Alta region. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, complex and beautifully balanced, with lovely depth at the core, blossoming notes of *sous bois*, modest tannins and a very, very long, very classy finish. The Graciano component really starts to show here on the backend with extended air, as the red fruity elements come to the fore. This is a beautiful vintage of Viño del Olivo! 2019-2065. **94+**.



The thousand year-old olive tree in the heart of the vineyard, from which the Viña del Olivo takes its name.

2001 Rioja “Viño del Olivo”- Viñedos del Contino (Rioja Alavesa)

The 2001 vintage in Rioja is one of the great modern classics in this region of Spain, and the Viño del Olivo is not surprisingly exceptional in this year. Spring was warm and budbreak

and flowering were consequently early in 2001, setting the tables for a fine growing season that had just enough precipitation to allow steady ripening all the way to the end of September, when picking began at Contino. The Viño del Olivo comes in at its customary 14.1 percent octane and was made from a blend of ninety percent Tempranillo and ten percent Graciano this year. The wine offers up a pure, complex and wide open bouquet of raspberries, smoked meats, wild fennel, bonfires, *garrigue*, autumnal soil tones and a nice dollop of cedar in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and focused, with excellent spicy complexity, a great core of fruit and impressive focus and grip on the long, complex and soil-driven finish. This is another great vintage of Viño del Olivo! 2019-2055. **94.**

1999 Rioja “Viño del Olivo”- Viñedos del Contino (Rioja Alavesa)

1999 was a very difficult vintage in Rioja Alavesa, as an April frost affected eighty percent of the region. There were also some heavy thunderstorms in much of Alavesa that brought hail damage, but fortunately, Contino was spared these. The harvest here started on September 14th and continued to the end of October in 1999, with the picking teams making many passes through the vineyards to select only sections of the vineyard at peak ripeness. The 1999 Viño del Olivo has turned out very nicely, with a bit lower octane of 13.5 percent and a cépages of ninety percent Tempranillo and ten percent Graciano. Though this is a touch lower in octane than the 2004 or 2001, it seems a bit riper in fruit personality on the nose, offering up scents of red and black raspberries, *garrigue*, meaty tones, cigar smoke, a touch of forest floor and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, spicy and robust in personality, with a good core, modest tannins and a fine, long and tangy finish. This is a fine bottle, but it does not quite have the same precision as the 2004 and 2001 versions that preceded it in the lineup. 2019-2060. **92.**

1996 Rioja “Viño del Olivo”- Viñedos del Contino (Rioja Alavesa)

The 1996 vintage was the first commercial release of Viño del Olivo, which had been made in the year or two previously and kept in house, as the Madrazos wanted to see if it would make for an interesting, separate cuvée. Back in 1996, there was no Hungarian oak used in the cooperage for the Viño del Olivo, so the mix here is solely French and American barrels for aging. The wine comes in at fourteen percent alcohol and is composed of a blend of ninety-five percent Tempranillo and five percent Graciano. It offers up a simply gorgeous, red fruity bouquet today of raspberries, cherries, smoked meats, a touch of black tea, *sous bois*, wild fennel and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and beautifully balanced, with a lovely core, great soil signature and still a bit of backend tannin perking up the long and very complex finish. Just a beautiful vintage of Viño del Olivo! 2019-2055. **94.**

Contino Gran Reserva

The Gran Reserva bottling at Contino is unique in that it is the only red wine produced here that will typically include a very small percentage of white grapes in the blend, much like Viognier plays making a cameo appearance in certain cuvées of Côte-Rôtie. This is at least true in the most recent vintages of Contino Gran Reserva, as both the 2012 and 2010 versions include three percent Viura in their cépages. With the two older vintages of Gran Reserva that we tasted in October, the varietal breakdowns were not available to compare.

2012 Rioja Gran Reserva- Viñedos del Contino (Rioja Alavesa)

2012 was the last of three consecutive drought vintages in Rioja, but the Gran Reserva has turned out very nicely. The wine is composed of a blend of seventy percent Tempranillo,

fifteen percent Graciano, twelve percent Garnacha and three percent Viura. The wine is still quite youthful on both the nose and palate, with the black fruity bouquet offering up scents of cassis, black cherries, cigar smoke, dark soil tones, *garrigue* and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and still fairly primary in personality, with a fine core, good focus and grip and a long, moderately tannic and nicely tangy finish. It is still very early days for this wine. 2024-2075+. **92.**

2010 Rioja Gran Reserva- Viñedos del Contino (Rioja Alavesa) served from magnum

The 2010 vintage of Gran Reserva at Contino was only bottled in magnum, with 3,261 magnums produced. The wine is composed of the same *cépages* as the 2012 version, but is slightly higher in octane (14.4 versus fourteen percent for the 2012), but as the growing season was generally fairly cool by Rioja Alavesa standards, the ripeness here was attained by a very long period of hang time, with the harvest taking place from September 27th to October 25th in this vintage. The resulting wine has turned out beautifully, offering up a beautiful, blossoming nose of black cherries, smoked meats, *garrigue*, a bit of pepper, lovely Graciano red fruity overtones and a nice base of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, long and nascently complex, with a superb core, fine-grained tannins and a long, tangy and beautifully balanced finish. Despite this wine's octane level, it is cool in the mouth and very precise and classy. 2022-2075+. **93.**

1991 Rioja Gran Reserva- Viñedos del Contino (Rioja Alavesa) served from magnum

1991 is one of the great, classic vintages in Rioja and the Contino Reserva is a stellar example. Interestingly, though this is a great Rioja vintage, 1991 was not without its climactic challenges during the growing season, as spring saw a wide range of temperature volatility and it was rainy. Summer was very hot and vines shut down for a period of time due to hydric stress, so that at the end of the day, this was a very long growing season and it was the gorgeous late summer and early autumn weather that made the vintage's greatness. The octane level of the 1991 Gran Reserva is the same as for the 2010, coming in at 14.4 percent and offering up similar purity and precision in its aromatic constellation of raspberries, Rioja spice tones, smoked meats, a gorgeous base of stony soil tones, celery seed, cigar smoke and cedar. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, complex and nicely tangy (from its Graciano component), with marvelous mid-palate depth, fine complexity and grip and a very long, seamless and utterly refined finish. This is a great wine with decades of life still ahead of it- particularly in magnum- and it may yet improve with further bottle age. 2019-2050+. **94+.**

1989 Rioja Gran Reserva- Viñedos del Contino (Rioja Alavesa)

The 1989 vintage was very difficult in Rioja and the Contino Gran Reserva ended up being one of the lowest octane examples of this bottling ever produced, as it came in at only 12.5 percent octane, Victor Urrutia noted that "the 1989 has been tough company for most of its life, but is perhaps just starting to come around now." It remains more closed than the 1991 on both the nose and palate, but it is clearly starting to stir and in due course, this is going to be an excellent wine. The bouquet is a complex blend of black cherries, smoked meats, a touch of tomato, lovely spice tones, a fine base of soil and cedary wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and starting to show more expressiveness on the attack than the bouquet suggests, with a fine core of fruit, lovely soil signature, still a bit of backend tannin and impressive focus and grip on the long finish. While the 1989 Gran Reserva has obviously taken its time to mature, all of the constituent components are here for a really fine bottle in a few more years and this is going to turn out to be an excellent wine. 2027-2075. **92+.**



Contino Reserva

As I mentioned above, for the first twenty years, this was the only bottling produced at the Contino estate. I had been told during my visit to Contino back in 2014 by Jesús de Madrazo, that the early vintages of Contino Reserva were raised in a fifty-fifty blend of French and American oak barrels, and I still believe this to be the case, though I have read elsewhere that the first vintages were made entirely in American oak. There were only roughly twenty thousand bottles produced of Contino Reserva in the very earliest years, as one will remember that the average age of the vines here today is only a bit over thirty years-old, with much of the vineyard having been planted over the first decade or so and the younger vine fruit was not used to produce any Contino bottlings until they had reached a proper age in the mid-1990s. We finished up our tasting in October with these two oldies of Contino Reserva and both wines were showing beautifully.

1983 Rioja Reserva- Viñedos del Contino (Rioja Alavesa)

The 1983 Contino Reserva is a nicely ripe example, coming in at 13.5 percent octane and offering up a beautiful and fully mature bouquet of raspberries, smoked meats, Rioja spice tones, a touch of tomato, celery seed, lavender and some rosemary in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with tangy acids, melted tannins and lovely length and grip on the focused and very classy finish. This was not a particularly strong vintage in Rioja in general, but clearly the Contino estate did quite well. 2019-2045+. **92.**

1974 Rioja Reserva- Viñedos del Contino (Rioja Alavesa)

I have been fortunate to drink the inaugural vintage of Contino Reserva on a few occasions over the years and I have always enjoyed the wine. The *cépages* for this first commercial release of Contino was eighty-five percent Tempranillo, eight percent Mazuelo, five percent Garnacha and two percent Viura. Interestingly, the wine is lower in octane than the 1983 version, coming in at 12.5 percent alcohol. The bouquet is deep, complex and nicely tertiary in personality today, wafting from the glass in a mix of red and black cherries, smoked meats, black tea, *sous bois*, cigar smoke and a lovely mix of Rioja spice tones in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and completely *à point*, with fine mid-palate depth, impeccable balance, melted tannins and a long, velvety and nicely complex finish. This is a beautiful wine that shows just how good the potential was at Contino right from the start, but my gut instincts tell me that the wines made here in the vintages since the mid-1990s are going to be even better at their apogees than the lovely 1974. 10`9-1030+. **92.**

RECENTLY TASTED RHÔNE WINES FALL OF 2019



The top of the slope of the beautiful Côte Brune vineyard in Côte-Rôtie.

Since my last visit to the Rhône Valley back in October of 2017 (I cannot believe two years have passed already!), I have been awaiting the release of the top red wines from the 2016 vintage, which I tasted in cask in the cellars here and absolutely fell in love with, as they are a very classically styled set of wines to my palate. The last few months have seen more 2016s shipped into the market, as well as the first serious wave of 2017s from the longer-lived appellations and there is an awful lot of outstanding Rhône wine currently in the pipeline. As I was getting my last batches of samples together for this feature, the first of the 2018 reds have also started to arrive, so Rhône lovers are going to have a wide variety of bottlings available to them in the market in the next several months. Of the three vintages, the 2016s are unequivocally my favorites (at least at this point, as only a handful of 2018s have shipped), as they are really classically proportioned wines that couple fine depth of fruit with strong soil signatures and impressive structures for long and rewarding cellaring. The follow-up vintage of 2017 also has more than its share of ringing successes, but it was a more problematic growing season, with issues with the fruit set in the wake of a very early flowering causing issues with yields, drought conditions adding to the challenge and some sectors also having to navigate both frost damage in

the spring and hail in the summer, so there were plenty of challenges to be surmounted for *vignerons* in this vintage. Happily, many were able to clear the hurdles of 2017 and have made excellent wines. The newest vintage finding its way into the pipeline is from the very warm summer of 2018, which may capture the imaginations of the general public a bit more than true connoisseurs of the region, due to truly plush and borderline overripe fruit tones brought about by the heat of 2018. It is still very early on for this vintage and only the most forward bottlings have crossed my desk, so it is premature to make any firm pronouncements on the 2018s, but I have already seen more *sur maturité* in some of the red wines than I like. But, the more serious bottlings from 2018 are still resting comfortably in estates' cellars and we may well see more backbone and freshness from the top wines than is often the case with the more easy-going, early-drinking cuvées that have already been released.

At this point in time, it makes more sense to first look at the 2017 vintage in the Rhône Valley, before moving on to the 2018s, as this is the vintage that is predominantly in the market right now or due for shipping in the next few months. It is a vintage that varies quite a bit in the northern and southern halves of the region, with the north perhaps getting the better hand dealt to it climatically in 2017. The spring of 2017 arrived early in the Rhône Valley and the flowering took place at the start of April, but temperatures dropped dramatically at the end of the month, hurting the fruit set and *coulure* was a major problem as a result. The two varieties most affected by the poor fruit set because of the low temperatures at the end of April were grenache in the south and viognier in the north, so yields for both of these grapes was off by nearly half in 2017. For grenache producers in the south, they were able to compensate a bit with other varieties in their blends, so there will be plenty of examples of Châteauneuf du Pape with lower percentages of grenache in the final blends than is customary in this vintage, with more mourvèdre in particular filling in the gaps, as this variety was far less affected than the earlier flowering grenache in the south. Condrieu fans will not be happy in 2017, as viognier was generally off by half due to the *coulure*. The northern half of the Rhône Valley's red wine producers fared better with the cold snap in late April, as syrah is not as precocious as grenache, so yields were far less affected by bad fruit set in the spring. However, Crozes-Hermitage and Saint-Joseph had to deal with frost and a bit of hail in 2017, so yields are off in both appellations in this vintage, with Crozes a bit less affected of the two.

The high summer days of 2017 were defined by both heat and drought in both ends of the Rhône Valley, so this is another warm growing season and hydric stress played a role in the shaping of the vintage. Fortunately, there was rain in August to alleviate many hydric stress issues that might have cropped up and set the table for a promising harvest. In contrast, 2016 had witnessed lower average temperatures during the growing season than was the case in 2017, and this is why that vintage is so classically proportioned. The resulting 2017 wines in the north are very good, and many growers compare them stylistically to the very popular 2015s, with perhaps even more suave tannins than the chewier 2015s, but with the same ripe, thick fruit. In the south, 2017 is also a very powerful, ripe vintage, but with hydric stress here leading to smaller berries and thick skins, producers will have had to be careful managing their tannins through more gentle extractions to keep the overall balance in their wines. I have not yet tasted any 2017 Châteauneufs, so it will be interesting to see how the wines show when they start to ship *en masse* over the next year. Certainly the Côtes du Rhône bottlings I have tasted so far have been quite satisfying and nicely balanced. In the northern half of the Rhône valley, the 2017s that I

have tried so far have been very good, with a bit more early plushness than their 2016 counterparts, but very good overall structural frameworks and it is likely to be another very popular vintage.

Right now, I like the early size and shape of the 2017 wines from the northern half of the Rhône even a touch more than the 2015s at a similar stage, but I was never the biggest fan of the 2015 vintage, and others may not agree with my slight preference for the 2017s. In any case, one of the biggest problem with the 2017 reds in the north will be the shorter yields, as Saint-Joseph is off by thirty percent and Crozes by roughly ten percent. Yields are better in the bigger name appellations of Hermitage and Côte-Rôtie, but Cornas suffered more severely from the mid-summer drought and yields here are down by a third in 2017. I suspect there are some really, really good wines getting loaded into the pipeline from this vintage in the northern half of the region and due to ship in the coming months. As I mentioned before, Condrieu was hit hard by the issue of *coulure* in 2017 and yields here are generally off by forty to fifty percent in this vintage. Additionally, the hot and dry growing season was not ideal for viognier, so one has to imagine some ripe and rather soft wines emerging in coming months, but the only 2017 Condrieu that I have tasted so far was excellent, so there may be more surprises than one might expect from the general summer conditions.

Regarding the early arrivals from the 2018 vintage, this was another hot growing season, but happily, the winter had been quite wet, so water reserves were able to be replenished after the drought conditions of 2017. Flowering was abundant and the early spring weather was excellent, but much of the month of June was rainy and mildew was a constant pressure on *vignerons* and spraying had to be carried out with great frequency during the first three weeks of the month to protect the plants. Happily, by the end of June the sun returned and the growing season was very nice the rest of the way on to harvest. The possible Achilles' Heel of the 2018s (for those who adequately handled the mildew pressures of early June) was plenty of heat in August, which sent sugars soaring and *vignerons* scrambling to get rolling with picking at the very beginning of September- one of the earliest harvest starts on record in the Rhône Valley. For those unprepared to get rolling, overripeness can be the result and less interesting wines. And of course, for *vignerons* with several appellations, the best vineyard sites would be picked first in the immediate aftermath of the heat spike in August, so we may see more *sur maturité* in Crozes or Saint-Joseph examples from producers in the north who also have parcels in Côte-Rôtie, Hermitage or Cornas. Certainly the few early 2018 Crozes-Hermitage bottlings that I have tasted already have been a bit overtly overripe in personality would bear out this observation. But, that said, reports out of the region from *vignerons* are very positive about the 2018s, so the few overripe examples I have tasted thus far may not end up being indicative of the vintage in general.

Which finally leads me back to the 2016 vintage, which can still be found in the market and which is one of the great classics of the last twenty years in the region. The wines are a bit different in the northern and southern halves of the Rhône, with the south finding a completely easy growing season and plenty of ripeness from the heat of August. In the northern half, things were quite a bit different, for the spring was cold and very rainy, so that everything was delayed getting out of the blocks and the vines were two to three weeks behind schedule by the first weeks of May. This was exacerbated by a strong bout of hail on the hill of Hermitage in April,

which severely cut back yields in the *lieux à dits* that were hit. The months of June and July were fine in the north, albeit very dry, but August was blazingly hot and a great many vines shut down from the combination of hydric stress and very high temperatures for most of the month. At this point, 2016 was not looking promising at all in the north! But, much needed rain arrived on the first of September and alleviated the hydric stress and the maturation process was able to get kick-started again. Temperatures also descended to seasonal levels in September and one of the most beautiful Indian Summers in recent memory descended on the northern Rhône up through the month of October, allowing all of the lagging maturity in the vineyards to catch up beautifully and growers were able to pick grapes in a leisurely fashion that allowed each parcel to ripen perfectly. In the southern half of the Rhône, the spring of 2016 was far less rainy and budbreak and flowering both took place at their normal times and were quite uneventful and successful. So a big and healthy crop was expected from the outset and this is exactly what the region received. Hydric stress was less evident (though not completely absent) during the drier mid-summer months here in the south and the heat of August was not as pronounced in this end of the valley as it was in the northern half of the region. Several *vignerons* noted that the hot days of August were coupled with relatively cool evenings, which allowed for a bit more freshness in the finished wines than in other equally torrid summers such as 2003 or 2009.

So, where does all this leave fanciers of wines from the Rhône Valley? To a certain extent, there is a little something for everyone available right now, depending on how one's tastes run. There are plenty of big, buxom and heady wines to be found for those who like that particular style (obviously, those are not my preferred styles of Rhône wines), but also a myriad of options in more classical and soil-driven styles that harken back to the wines made in the region in the decade of the 1980s. While the 2016s are the wines to focus on for those who gravitate to the latter style (particularly in the northern half of the Rhône), there are plenty of options available from 2017 as well that will please the more traditionally-inclined palate. It is too early to say what 2018 will bring, as I have only tasted a handful of early-arriving red wines, but my gut instinct is that this vintage is going to be more problematical for those of us who gravitate towards more classically-styled wines and '16 and '17 are the vintages that are likely to merit more attention than the 2018s. Keep in mind that the classical styling of the 2016s, particularly in the north, also includes plenty of structure for aging, and a great many of these wines are going to demand a proper stay in the cellar before they really start to sing. There is almost a sense of leanness to many of the northern 2016s from the Rhône valley that I like very much, as it is my distinct impression that there is plenty of fruit in these wines down in the core, buttoned up behind their early chassis of tannins, and with sufficient cellaring, they will blossom into perfectly balanced and stunning wines. But, for example, wines like the lovely 2016s from Julien Barge in Côte-Rôtie are not going to really start to show until they have had a good decade in the cellar, and opening up wines of this style early on will only really be for educational purposes, as they are built for the long haul. If you are more inclined to wish to drink your wines a bit earlier, then the 2017 vintage is going to be a better option to focus on.

I should take a moment to mention a completely new to me bottling of Châteauneuf du Pape that I had the good fortune to taste in the preparation for this report, and which I absolutely loved. This is the wonderful wines from Chapelle St. Theodoric, which is a relatively new venture put together by the US importer, Peter Weygandt, and the *vigneron* Baptiste Grangeon. The project takes its name from the Chapelle St. Theodoric, which happens to be the oldest

building in all of the region of Châteauneuf du Pape. The small parcels of vineyards that surround it are primarily sandy in their underlying *terroir*, which as many lovers of Châteauneuf du Pape know, is also the soil composition of one of the region's most famous wines, Château Rayas. Baptiste Grangeon, farms solely old vine grenache in two distinct parcels for this project, le Grand Pin and la Guigasse. They sit up at the highest elevation in the appellation, flanking the vines of the aforementioned Château Rayas and Pignan, the second Châteauneuf du Pape bottling from the Reynaud family. Importer Peter Weygandt conceived of and co-directs the Chapelle St. Theodoric project, with an aim towards making both bottlings here along the lines that the late Jacques Reynaud practiced during his long career at nearby Château Rayas. For the fermentations, the stems are retained in their entirety, solely indigenous yeasts are used and the wines are raised in a wide range of older *foudres* prior to bottling. As the *terroirs* between the le Grand Pin and la Guigasse bottlings are different from both Pignan and Rayas, the wines from Chapelle St. Theodoric have their own, distinct personalities, but there is a stylistic nod to the great wines produced by Monsieur Reynaud during his days at the helm of Château Rayas and I think that lovers of old school Châteauneuf du Pape are very much going to enjoy the wines from Chapelle St. Theodoric.



I should mention that the unique circumstances under which I have been writing and tasting these last few months, while trying to assist my father with his health issues, have put some restrictions on all of the articles in this most recent issue of the newsletter. Having to spend

a lot of my time in the hospitals with my father, I have not been able to be as thorough in canvassing importers here in New York for samples from the Rhône valley for the preparation for this report. A few importers I wrote to did not answer my initial emails (a not all that infrequent occurrence, as everyone is busy), and I was not able to circle back to them and try to get samples a second time, so the wines from producers that they represent will just have to form the foundation for the next feature on the region. As Éric Texier is one of my absolute favorite producers in the region and is represented by one of the importers I did not hear back from, this report does not have any wines from Monsieur Texier included, and this may well be the first time I have written about the Rhône valley and did not have plenty of notes on the Texier wines. However, given the time constraints I have been under in the last couple of months, not to mention coming down with a nasty cold at the end of October which precluded me from tasting for several days, it probably worked out for the better that not everyone who I wrote to ended up getting back to me and sending samples, as I never could have gotten through everything in time to get the newsletter out on schedule.

The following notes are listed regionally from north to south this time around, just to change things up a bit (usually I list things south to north for this feature), with *Vins de France* bottlings starting out the proceedings and then the appellations just listed geographically from Côte-Rôtie to Châteauneuf du Pape. Within each section, the wines are listed by vintage, with 2018s starting out, and then alphabetically by producer within each vintage bracket. There are notes on a few very good Bandols at the tail end of the feature, as the wines were very good and it seemed illogical not to list them in this article, as they wines are currently in the market and well worth adding to your cellar.

Straight Syrah

2018 Syrah “Collines Rhodaniennes”- Vincent Paris Sélection

The Vincent Paris Sélection 2018 Syrah “Collines Rhodaniennes” is an excellent value, as it offers impressive depth and true northern Rhône personality at a great price. The bouquet is deep and loaded with cassis, roasted game, pepper, dark chocolate, woodsmoke and a good base of soil tones. On the palate the wine is full-bodied and impressively well-endowed at the core for its appellation, with a bit of firm tannin, fine focus and grip and pretty good complexity on the long and vibrant finish. The broad shoulders of the 2018 vintage really work to advantage here and this is a simple Syrah appellation that will age very well in this vintage. 2019-2035. **88+**.

2016 Syrah “Sensation du Nord” Vins de Pays- Domaine Patrick et Christophe Bonnefond

The 2016 Syrah Vins de Pays from the Bonnefonds is made from younger vines, but is raised in older *demi-muids* and treated with quite some seriousness in the cellar. It shows on the nose, which offers up a youthfully complex nose of cassis, hung game, a touch of hazelnut, bonfire and a nice touch of soil tones. On the palate the wine is fullish, well-balanced and tasty, with a good core, just a bit of tannin and good length and grip on the finish. This is not overly complex, but has good northern Rhône character and is a good value. 2019-2030. **88**.

Côte-Rôtie

2017 Côte-Rôtie “la Porchette”- Domaine Julien Pilon

The 2017 Côte-Rôtie “la Porchette” from Julien Pilon is superb on both the nose and palate. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a youthfully complex blend of dark berries, grilled

meats, hazelnut, complex soil tones, bonfires, a nice touch of the stems and a bit of smoky new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and quite elegant in personality, with a good core of fruit, fine soil signature, fine-grained, suave tannins and lovely length and grip on the poised and very well-balanced finish. This is a very fine example of Côte-Rôtie. 2022-2065. **92.**

2016 Côte-Rôtie “Cuvée du Plessy”- Domaine Gilles Barge

Readers may recall that I tasted the 2016s from Julien Barge in their infancy while visiting the estate in Ampuis back in October of 2017. They were closed down and adolescent and I have been looking forward to trying them out of bottle ever since, as I love this vintage in Côte-Rôtie. Finally, the wines have arrived and they are all classics in the making. The 2016 Cuvée du Plessy is the most suave out of the blocks, offering up a superb and youthful bouquet of red and black raspberries, smoked meats, a touch of hazelnut, pepper, stony soil tones and a smoky topnote of bonfires. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and beautifully transparent, with a good core, fine-grained tannins, good acids and excellent balance and grip on the long, nascently complex and really vibrant finish. This is old school Côte-Rôtie, as it comes in at a svelte 12.5 percent octane and is nicely structured and built for the long haul. It will be a dynamite and very elegant, middleweight example of Côte-Rôtie when it is ready to drink, but expect it to need a decade out from the vintage in the cellar to properly start to stir. 2026-2075. **92.**

2016 Côte-Rôtie “Côte Blonde”- Domaine Gilles Barge

The 2016 Côte Blonde from the Barge family estate is a stellar bottle in the making, with a bit more mid-palate depth and overt muscle than the very, very good Cuvée de Plessy, but still with the traditional refinement of this great *lieu à dit*. This wine is still youthfully reserved, but already there is a perfumed expressiveness in the nose here that forecasts great things in the years to come. The nose offers up scents of black raspberries, plums, gamebird, pepper, a hint of black olive, a beautifully complex base of soil and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, pure, full-bodied and just gorgeous, with lovely intensity of flavor, a potentially velvety palate impression in due course, fine-grained tannins and a long, reserved and brilliantly balanced finish. Like all the 2016s *chez* Barge, this is tightly-knit out of the blocks and needs bottle age, but it is will be stunning when it is really ready to drink. 2028-2075+. **94.**

2016 Côte-Rôtie “Côte Brune”- Domaine Gilles Barge

The 2016 Côte Brune from Julien Barge is the most powerful of these three elegant examples of Côte-Rôtie, with the vibrant precision of the best wines of the vintage beautifully coupled to depth and soil signature. However, that said, it is also the most reticent out of the blocks and needs bottle age to start to really sing. The excellent bouquet wafts from the glass in a youthful mix of cassis, a touch of black raspberry, smoked meats, pepper, a nice touch of eucalyptus, hazelnuts, a very complex base of soil and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, tightly-knit and built for the long haul, with a fine core of fruit, a superb structural chassis, ripe, seamless tannins and a very long, soil-driven and nascently complex finish. This is going to be a great bottle in the fullness of time, but exercise patience and let it fully stretch its wings and get up to cruising altitude! 2028-2075+. **94.**

2016 Côte-Rôtie “Colline de Couzou”- Domaine Patrick et Christophe Bonnefond

The Colline de Couzou bottling of Côte-Rôtie is primarily from vineyards on the northern side of the appellation, from the *Côtes de Brune*, with eighty percent of the blend hailing from top northern *lieux à dits* such as Rozier, Côte Rozier and les Rochainsand, which are primarily

on schist. The other twenty percent hails from southern sites in Tupin and Coteaux de Semons, but from granitic soils there. The grapes are totally destemmed and the wine aged in four hundred liter *demi-muids*, with ten percent renewed each year. The 2016 Colline de Couzou offers up a superb, youthful bouquet of dark berries, smoked meats, pepper, hazelnuts, a fine base of soil and a bit of smoky oak in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely structured, with a good core, fine-grained tannins and very good length and grip. 2024-2065. **90.**

2016 Côte-Rôtie “les Rochains”- Domaine Patrick et Christophe Bonnefond

The les Rochains *lieu à dit* lies right next door to la Landonne. The parcel owned by Patrick and Christophe Bonnefond is made from vines that were mostly planted in 1955 and is aged in four hundred liter barrels, with twenty-five percent new and the rest one wine casks. The 2016 les Rochains shows great potential, wafting from the glass in a youthful blend of black raspberries, smoked meats, a great base of soil tones, bonfires, hazelnuts, pepper and a very well done framing of cedary new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and beautifully balanced, with a great chassis of suave tannins, a lovely core, great transparency and a long, complex and very promising finish. This is a fine bottle in the making. 2026-2075. **92.**

2016 Côte-Rôtie “Fortis”- Domaine du Monteillet (Stéphane Montez)

The Côte-Rôtie “Fortis” from Stéphane Montez is made entirely from syrah (no trace of viognier in this bottling) and aged entirely in *demi-muids*, twenty percent are new each year. The 2016 version is an excellent young Côte-Rôtie, offering up a classic bouquet of black raspberries, cassis, pepper, hung game, a gorgeous base of soil, woodsmoke and a touch of new oak in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a suave core of fruit, excellent soil signature, fine-grained tannins and a long, poised and very, very promising finish. The 2016 vintage in Côte-Rôtie is one of the most elegant, high quality vintages I have ever tasted and this wine is a lovely example of the vintage! 2026-2075+. **92+.**

2016 Côte-Rôtie “Côte Brune”- Domaine Rostaing

I was delighted to see that the Rostaing family decided to use the old Gentaz label for their first release of a single vineyard bottling from the Côte Brune vineyard. As I reported back in February of 2018, the Rostaings now own three quarters of a hectare of vines in this vineyard, with fifty-five *ares* having come from Messieurs Dervieux and Gentaz when they retired (and all very old vines) and twenty *ares* having been purchased by René Rostaing in the late 1980s. I loved this wine out of barrel when I was at the domaine towards the end of 2017 and it has captured all of its potential in bottled form, though this is still a very young wine and is properly built for a long life in the cellar before drinking. The bouquet offers up a classic blend of dark berries, black cherries, pepper, a bit of roasted game, plenty of smokiness, a great base of soil, a touch of hazelnut and a hint of violet in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, soil-driven and nicely structured, with ripe tannins, a great core of fruit and excellent focus and balance on the very long, very pure and very promising finish. All this needs is time! I would be inclined not to touch a bottle before it has reached its fifteenth birthday, and it will clearly be even better at age twenty-five or thirty! It is a great bottle of Côte-Rôtie in the making and very much worthy of its Gentaz heritage! 2031-2080. **96.**

2016 Côte-Rôtie “la Viallière”- Domaine Rostaing

The Rostaings’ 2016 la Viallière bottling (which has not been produced since a couple of vintages in the mid-1990s) has been graced with the former label of René Rostaing’s father-in-law, Albert Dervieux, who was one of the great figures in Côte-Rôtie during his long and illustrious career. As I mentioned back in my report on my visit to the winery in October of

2017, the domaine now owns more 1.2 hectares of vines in la Viallière, one-third of their vines originating from Albert Dervieux upon his retirement and now more than one hundred years of age. The other two-thirds were purchased by Monsieur Rostaing and replanted in the early 1980s, so are now around thirty-five years of age, but I do not know how much of the production from the younger vines was dedicated to the single vineyard bottling. The Rostaing family's 2016 la Viallière was outstanding out of cask and is equally impressive out of bottle, offering up a deep and youthful bouquet of black raspberries, dark berries, grilled venison, pepper, espresso, complex soil tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and ripely tannic, with fine soil signature, lovely focus and grip, plenty of depth at the core and a long, youthful and still gently stemmy finish. Again, this is a wine that needs at least fifteen years of bottle age and will not peak until it is at least a quarter century in age, but it is going to be brilliant in due course! 2031-2080. **95+**.



I love that the Rostaing family has brought back the labels from previous generations for these cuvées.

Condrieu

2017 Condrieu “les Grandes Chaillées”- Domaine du Montillet (Stéphane Montez)

Stéphane Montez's 2017 Condrieu “les Grandes Chaillées” is ripe, but pretty moderate by today's viognier standards, as it comes in listed at fourteen percent alcohol in this vintage. The wine offers up a beautifully expressive bouquet of pear, casaba melon, coriander seed, musky floral tones and a nice base of soil. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and complex,

with sound framing acids, excellent focus and grip and a very long, classy finish. This is one of the best Condrieus I have tasted in quite a while. *Chapeau!* 2019-2025. **92.**

Saint-Joseph Blanc

2016 Saint-Joseph Blanc- Domaine du Monteillet (Stéphane Montez)

The 2016 Saint-Joseph Blanc from Stéphane Montez is composed of a blend of two-thirds roussanne and one-third marsanne (with these being old vines), with the vineyards granitic in nature. The wine is vinified and raised in *Allier* barrels, with none of them new. The 2016 version comes in at fourteen percent octane and delivers a fine, ripe nose of pink grapefruit, pineapple, gently musky floral tones, fine minerality and a bit of citrus peel in the upper register. There seems like there may just be a whisper of botrytis here adding complexity on the nose. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and smoky in personality, with a rock solid core of fruit, impressive mineral drive, good acids and grip and a long, broad-shouldered and complex finish. This is built like a Hermitage Blanc and seems likely to age quite nicely. Impressive juice. 2019-2030. **89.**

Saint-Joseph Rouge

2018 Saint-Joseph “les Côtes”- Domaine Vincent Paris

The 2018 Saint-Joseph “les Côtes” from Vincent Paris is a full point lower in octane than some of his other “Sélection” bottlings, as this comes in at thirteen percent octane and offers up impressive precision on both the nose and palate. The bouquet offers up a complex blend of cassis, black raspberries, smoked meats, a bit of lavender, plenty of soil tones, woodsmoke and dark chocolate. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and nicely peppery, with a fine core of fruit, lovely mineral drive, firm, well-integrated tannins and a long, complex and very classy finish. It is still very early days to be tasting 2018 reds from the northern Rhône, but I hope there are a lot more wines coming down the pipeline with this stylistic bent! 2023-2050. **92.**

2017 Saint-Joseph- Domaine de l’Iserand (Jean-François Malsert)

The regular bottling of Saint-Joseph from Jean-François Malsert is composed of his younger vine fruit from his organically-farmed 1.5 hectares of vines, complemented by some purchased fruit grown by friends in the appellation. The wine is made without added SO₂ and raised in older *demi-muids* and amphora. The 2017 version is very good, offering up plenty of depth in its aromatic constellation of cassis, black olives, smoked meats, dark soil tones, smoke and a hint of medicinal syrah topnotes. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely structured, with a good core, fine soil signature, a nice chassis of chewy tannins and impressive length and grip on the vibrant finish. This is good juice that is quite drinkable today, but will be even better once the tannins have a chance to relax a bit more. 2019-2030. **89.**

2017 Saint-Joseph “les Sabots de Coppi”- Domaine de l’Iserand (Jean-François Malsert)

Jean-François Malsert’s les Sabots de Coppi bottling of Saint-Joseph is produced from the older vines in the 1.5 hectare of vineyards he received from his grandfather in the appellation. The wine is made again without added SO₂ and raised in a combination of older *demi-muids* and amphora. Because these are older vines, there is more depth and stuffing here, but it also seems to me to be a bit more fragile structurally out of the blocks than the straight Saint Joe. The nose is not particularly precise, but offers up scents of cassis, roasted venison, dark soil, bonfire, coffee grounds and black olive. On the palate the wine is full-bodied and has good depth at the core, with firm, chewy tannins, good length and grip and a rather chunky, searching personality.

This latter characteristic may just be a function of the wine's relative youth and it will snap into focus with a bit of age, but for right now, I have more faith in the straight Saint-Joseph bottling in 2016. 2021-2030+? **86-88+?**

2016 Saint-Joseph “Chemin Faisant”- La Ferme Des Sept Lunes (Jean Delobre)

The Chemin Faisant bottling from Jean Delobre is his non-sulfur bottling in most vintages and this is again the case in the 2016 vintage. The 2016 version offers up good depth on the nose, but is not all that focused in its mélange of sweet dark berries, chocolate, pepper, black olive and dark soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely soil-driven, with a good core of fruit, a good chassis of chewy tannin and fine length and grip on the complex, but chunky finish. There are good raw materials here, as this has the best core of these three 2016s, but to my palate, the wine really needs to be bottled with a bit of SO₂ to help it on its way. 2019-2025+? **88.**

2016 Saint-Joseph “Pleine Lune”- La Ferme Des Sept Lunes (Jean Delobre)

The Saint-Joseph “Pleine Lune” bottling from Jean Delobre is from one of his warmer microclimates, giving the wine a lovely sense of impending generosity out of the blocks. The bouquet delivers a classic blend of cassis, black raspberry, pepper, a bit of roasted meats, black olive and a fine base of soil. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and nicely transparent in personality, with a good, solid core, moderate tannins and lovely length and grip on the svelte finish. I like the nicely buried structural chassis here, which might ask for a couple of years in the cellar to relax, but which does not impede tasters not wishing to wait. This was bottled without any added SO₂ in this vintage, but seems just a tad more precise at the moment than the Chemin Faisant. 2021-2030+. **88.**

2016 Saint-Joseph “Premier Quartier”- La Ferme Des Sept Lunes (Jean Delobre)

Of these three 2016 Saint-Joseph bottlings from Monsieur Delobre that I tasted for this report, the Premier Quartier is the only one that has a bit of added SO₂ at bottling. The wine is a bit more reserved on both the nose and palate than its stable mates, offering up a youthful bouquet of cassis, bonfire, spit-roasted game, pepper, just a hint of lavender and a good base of dark soil tones. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and nicely balanced, with respectable depth at the core, fine focus and grip and a modestly long, moderately tannic finish. This is not particularly well-endowed in the mid-palate and could do with a bit more backend length, but it trumps the other two bottlings in terms of precision, and this I attribute to the added SO₂. I should mention that this bottle was sealed with one of those fancy, Italian plastic corks championed by Laurent Ponsot, and I do not know how well these age. In any case, this is my favorite of the three bottlings from Jean Delobre in 2016, despite the fact that the other two have more depth and stuffing, but seem to suffer a bit to my palate from the lack of SO₂. 2020-2040. **89.**

2016 Saint-Joseph- Domaine du Monteillet (Stéphane Montez)

The 2016 Saint-Joseph from Domaine du Monteillet is not made from particularly old syrah vines, as these vineyards are only between five and twenty years of age, but the wine is very tasty and has the stuffing to age nicely. The bouquet is still a tad primary, offering up scents of cassis, smoked meats, pepper, a good base of soil, woodsmoke and a touch of hazelnut in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, well-balanced and has good depth at the core, with a fine signature of soil, moderate tannins and a long, promising, but still fairly adolescent finish. Today, the Cuvée du Papy is the more expressive of these two wines, as the regular Saint-Joseph is still youthful and has not yet started to blossom, but I really like the raw

materials here and this wine will be just lovely once it starts to stir. Give it a year or two. 2020-2040. **89.**

2016 Saint-Joseph “Cuvée du Papy”- Domaine du Monteillet (Stéphane Montez)

The 2016 Cuvée du Papy from Stéphane Montez, which he crafts from his oldest vines in the steepest parcels that the domaine owns in the appellation, is a lovely follow-up to the excellent 2015 version. The bouquet is deep, complex and utterly classical in personality, offering up scents of black raspberries, cassis, smoked meats, black olive, a touch of pepper, bonfires and a beautiful base of stony soil tones. On the palate the wine pure, full-bodied and nicely transparent in profile, with fine-grained tannins, very good focus and grip and a long, complex and very nicely balanced finish. This is not quite as powerful in personality as the 2015 version, but I like it every bit as well and it is drinking far more graciously out of the blocks than the deeper, but more structured 2015. Good juice. 2019-2040+. **91+.**

2012 Saint-Joseph- Domaine Pierre Gonon

The Gonon brothers’ 2012 Saint-Joseph is really beginning to drink spectacularly, but has many decades of life still ahead of it. When the wine is first poured it is a tightly-knit, intensely flavored example of this utterly refined vintage in the northern Rhône, with great transparency and precision to its fruit and spice tones, but with air, it deepens, broadens out on the palate and really unfolds majestically! Eventually, the wine offers up a beautiful bouquet of black raspberries, tea-smoked duck, pepper, a touch of chocolate, black olive, a great base of stony soil tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and marvelously complex, with a great core of fruit, stunning mineral drive, ripe, modest tannins and superb length and grip on the perfectly balanced finish. This is a brilliant bottle of wine. 2019-2045+. **94.**

Crozes-Hermitage Blanc

2017 Crozes-Hermitage Blanc- Domaine Yann Chave

The Crozes-Hermitage Blanc from Yann Chave is comprised of a blend of seventy percent of marsanne and thirty percent roussanne. It is fermented with indigenous yeasts and raised entirely in stainless steel to preserve freshness and cut in the finished wine. The 2017 example offers up a fine nose of pear, a touch of fresh pineapple, salty soil tones, a touch of coriander seed and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite ripe in personality, with a good core of fruit, fine soil signature and just a bit of backend heat on the long and bouncy finish. This comes in listed at thirteen percent, but seems just a bit higher to my palate. It is a fine example, but will probably be at its best in the next few years. 2019-2025. **89.**

Crozes-Hermitage Rouge

2018 Crozes-Hermitage- Domaine des Entrefaux

The 2018 Crozes-Hermitage from Domaine des Entrefaux is plenty ripe, as it comes in listed at fourteen percent octane and shows a touch of *sur maturité* on both the nose and palate that reminds me just a bit of the 1990s from Alain Graillot when they were just released. The bouquet offers up a complex blend of black raspberry, a hint of apricot, chocolate, pepper, roasted venison and dark soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and loaded with fruit at the core, with moderate, buried tannins and fine length and grip on the complex and slightly overripe finish. I have to assume that for many fans, this will be a real crowd-pleaser, but the touch of *sur maturité* may not be to the tastes of classicists. 2019-2030. **88.**

2018 Crozes-Hermitage- Vincent Paris Sélection

The 2018 Crozes-Hermitage from Vincent Paris also comes in listed at fourteen percent and shows some signs of overripeness on both the nose and palate. The complex bouquet is a mix of black cherries, black raspberries, chocolate, a touch of pepper, hung game and a dollop of soil. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely plush on the attack, with a good core, fine soil signature, a wide open personality and just a touch of tannin on the long and complex finish. This has plenty of depth of fruit, but is a bit unstructured by the high standards of Monsieur Paris' wines. 2019-2030. **88+**.



Hermitage

1990 Hermitage “Cuvée Cathelin”- Domaine Jean-Louis Chave

I have been very fortunate over the years to drink the 1990 Cuvée Cathelin from Gérard and Jean-Louis Chave on a handful of occasions, but I had not crossed paths with a bottle in over ten years prior to this example. The wine has aged brilliantly over the ensuing decade and is sheer perfection today, soaring from the glass in a complex and very refined blaze of black cherries, blackberries, cigar smoke, a very complex base of stony soil tones, smoked meats, pepper, a deft framing of toasty new oak and an exotic topnote of bergamot. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, complex and simply bottomless at the core, with flawless balance and focus, moderate tannins and great length and grip on the dancing and magical finish. This is humbling in its sheer beauty. 2019-2075. **100.**

1985 Hermitage- Domaine Jean-Louis Chave

I finished up my last bottles of 1985 Chave Hermitage a few years back, after having been very happy with the case I bought many, many years ago, but always having the feeling that with each bottle I drunk that the wine had not yet reached its absolute apogee of peak maturity. This is also a vintage of Chave where there is quite a bit of bottle variation, as reportedly, there were three slightly different “blends” produced by Gérard Chave in this year, to match the wishes of his various importers. In any case, this most recent bottle was the finest example of the 1985 that I have ever tasted and fully open and singing, offering up a very complex and red fruity nose of raspberries, spiced meats, pepper, a touch of cocoa powder, bonfires, incipient notes of forest floor, lavender and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and gorgeously transparent, with a great core of fruit, stunning complexity, melted tannins and a very long, tangy and beautifully balanced finish. Makes me wish I was only just starting in on my own case of the 1985! 2019-2060+. **95.**

Cornas

2017 Cornas “l’Élégance du Caillou”- Domaine Julien Pilon

The 2017 Cornas “l’Élégance du Caillou” from Julien Pilon is a really strong example of both the vintage and the appellation and this is going to be a first class bottle of Cornas in the fullness of time. The wine is nicely ripe, coming in at fourteen percent, but pure and soil-driven at the same time, with the bouquet delivering a fine constellation of cassis, black olive, roasted game, pepper, a fine base of soil, a touch of new oak and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full and chewy, with a superb core of fruit, lovely mineral drive, ripe, well-integrated tannins and a long, nascently complex and very promising finish. This is very fine juice in the making. 2027-2065. **92.**

Côtes du Rhône Blanc et Rosé

2018 Côtes du Rhône “les Claux” Blanc- Domaine Raymond Usseglio et Fils

The 2018 Côtes du Rhône “les Claux” Blanc from Stéphane Usseglio is composed of equal parts of grenache blanc, clairette and roussanne. The wine offers up a ripe nose of pear, peach, a touch of coriander seed, beeswax and a nice base of soil. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and complex, with a good core of fruit, fine focus and grip, sound framing acids and a long, zesty finish. This wine comes in listed at fourteen percent and is not overly long on acidity, so drinking it in its youth will be rewarded, but there is plenty to enjoy here over the next year or two. 2019-2022. **87.**

2018 Côtes du Rhône Rosé- Domaine Charvin

The 2018 Côtes du Rhône Rosé from Laurent Charvin is crafted from a blend of fifty percent each of grenache and cinsault, with the grapes farmed organically, picked by hand and co-fermented with indigenous yeasts. The wine offers up a fine bouquet of white cherries, orange peel, a touch of melon, sandy soil tones and a topnote of white flowers. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and succulent on the attack, with a good core, lovely backend grip and bounce and a long, complex finish. The acids are not particularly snappy here, so I would opt to drink the wine on the young side, but it is plenty fresh and precise today. Fine juice and a very good value from one of the best winemakers in the southern Rhône. 2019-2021. **88.**

Côtes du Rhône and Friends

2017 Côtes du Rhône “Mistral”- Domaine de Ferrand

The 2017 Côtes du Rhône “Mistral” from Philippe Bravay’s Domaine de Ferrand is composed of some of his younger vines and is made to be drunk right out of the blocks. The *cépages* here is fifty percent grenache, forty percent syrah and five percent each of carignan and vaccarèse. The wine comes in at 13.5 percent octane in 2017 and offers up a fine and classic nose of red and black raspberries, roasted meats, pepper, *garrigue* and a nice base of soil tones. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and very nicely detailed, with a good core, fine soil transparency, a bit of backend tannin and a long, gently warm and complex finish. This is a very good example. 2019-2030+. **88.**

2017 Côtes du Rhône- Domaine Terre Davau

The 2017 Côtes du Rhône from Domaine Terre Davau is composed of a blend of forty-five percent each of grenache and syrah, complemented with ten percent cinsault. Florian André is the winemaker here (though his mother still owns this property and he spends much of his time at his own Château de Mannisy), with the thirteen hectares of vines farmed organically since 2004 and biodynamically since 2009 and always hand-harvested. The wine offers up a very refined nose of black raspberries, spit-roasted game, a bit of *garrigue*, a fine base of soil and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and very well-balanced, with a good core, just a bit of chewy backend tannin and a long, peppery and complex finish. This is an excellent, old school example of Côtes du Rhône and a fine value. 2019-2030+. **89.**

2017 Côtes du Rhône “les Claux”- Domaine Raymond Usseglio et Fils

Stéphane Usseglio has taken over the primary responsibility for the family domaine from his father Raymond in the last few vintages. His les Claux bottling of Côtes du Rhône is composed of equal measures of grenache, syrah and mourvèdre. The *lieu à dit* of les Claux lies near the border of Lirac and is planted with fifty year-old vines. The 2017 version comes in at an even fourteen percent and offers up a deep bouquet of dark berries, a hint of fruitcake, roasted meats, bonfire, pepper, a touch of *garrigue* and a fine, complex base of soil tones. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, robust and rock solid at the core, with fine transparency, ripe, buried tannins, impressive complexity and a long, well-balanced and classy finish. The Usseglio family makes first class Châteauneuf du Pape and their les Claux Côtes du Rhône is extremely similar in personality. Fine, fine juice. 2019-2050. **90.**

2017 Lubéron- Château la Canorgue

The 2017 Lubéron rouge from Château la Canorgue is composed of sixty percent syrah, thirty percent grenache and a ten percent mix of mourvèdre and carignan. The vineyards here are farmed biodynamically and harvested entirely by hand, with the wine raised in old *foudres*. The 2017 is pretty ripe at 14.5 percent octane, but offers up a very attractive nose of raspberries, meaty tones, pepper, *garrigue*, bonfires and a good base of soil. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and modestly tannic, with a good core, fine complexity and just a whisper of heat poking out on the long finish. This is good juice for its octane. 2019-2030. **88.**

2017 Syrah “Love & Grapes” - Domaine de l’Ecu

This bottling of *Vin de France* from Domaine de l’Ecu is made from two hectares of organic or biodynamically-farmed syrah vines grown just outside the appellation boundary of Châteauneuf du Pape. The wine is fermented with indigenous yeasts and aged in stainless steel tanks for eight months prior to bottling. The 2017 version comes in at fourteen percent octane and offers up a fine nose of black raspberries, pepper, smoked meats, soil and spice tones. On the palate the wine is fullish, focused and succulent on the attack, with good mid-palate depth, little

tannin and fine length and grip on the absolutely delicious finish. This is made to be drunk young and will not last too many years, but I have to imagine that most bottles' lifespan will be measured in hours and days, rather than years in any case. A superb value! 2019-2021. **89.**

Vacqueyras and Gigondas

2017 Vacqueyras- Domaine les Ondines

Jérémy Onde only founded his domaine here in 2003, so this is a relatively new estate in the appellation. Since 2009, Monsieur Onde has been certified organic for his farming, and he hand picks his fruit and ferments solely with indigenous yeasts. The 2017 Vacqueyras from Domaine les Ondines is composed of a *cépages* of seventy percent grenache, twenty percent syrah, seven percent mourvèdre and three percent cinsault and comes in at an even fourteen percent octane. It offers up a bright and notably pure bouquet of raspberries, *garrigue*, roasted meats, a good base of soil tones, a touch of pepper and a smoky topnote of bonfire. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and impressively soil-driven in personality, with a fine core of fruit, firm, well-integrated tannins and impressive length and grip on the still fairly adolescent finish. Structurally, this really reminds quite a bit of the Châteauneufs I liked so well in the first half of the decade of the 1980s. This is first class Vacqueyras that will age beautifully. 2019-2040. **90.**

2017 Vacqueyras Blanc "Passion"- Domaine les Ondines

The 2017 Vacqueyras Blanc "Passion" from Domaine les Ondines is a blend of fifty percent clairette, thirty percent roussanne, ten percent bourblenc and five percent each of grenache blanc and viognier. Half the cuvée is raised in stainless steel tanks and the other half in casks of five hundred liters, with half of the barrels new and the others one wine barrels. The 2017 Passion offers up a complex bouquet of pear, coriander seed, salty soil tones, acacia blossoms and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, deep and complex, with good acids, a fine core of fruit and good length and grip on the broad-shouldered finish. There is plenty of complexity here from the wide range of different grape varieties, but I am not totally convinced that they all work together well. 2019-2025. **87+.**

2016 Gigondas- Domaine les Aphillanthes

The Gigondas from Daniel Boulle's Domaine les Aphillanthes is composed of a blend of ninety percent grenache and a ten percent of mourvèdre and cinsault. Monsieur Boulle farms his vineyards biodynamically (since 2003 and he has been certified by Ecocert since 2007) and he ferments his Gigondas in cement tanks and bottles it unfiltered. His 2016 version comes in at 14.5 percent and offers up a complex nose of red and black raspberries, pepper, spit-roasted meats, a superb base of stony soil tones, lovely spice tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with lovely soil signature, ripe, buried tannins and good length and grip on the complex, well-balanced and very gently warm finish. This carries its alcohol very well and I have to imagine that most Gigondas fans would not even notice it on the backend. This is a very good Gigondas that will age long and gracefully. 2023-2050+. **91.**

Châteauneuf du Pape Blanc

2018 Châteauneuf du Pape Blanc- Domaine Charvin

The 2018 Châteauneuf du Pape Blanc from Domaine Charvin is composed of a blend of forty-five percent old vine bourboulenc, twenty percent each of roussanne and clairette and fifteen percent grenache blanc. The wine comes in at 13.5 percent octane and is one of the best

examples of Châteauneuf du Pape Blanc that I have tasted in several years! The bouquet offers up a complex mix of pear, coriander seed, a hint of beeswax, sandy soil tones, dried flowers, citrus zest and just a hint of white pepper in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, bright and complex, with sound framing acids, a lovely core, excellent soil signature and a long, refined and very classy finish. This is excellent. 2019-2030+. **92.**



Châteauneuf du Pape Rouge

2016 Châteauneuf du Pape “le Grand Pin”- Chapelle St. Theodoric

The Chapelle St. Theodoric is the oldest building in all of the region of Châteauneuf du Pape, with the vineyards that surround it primarily sandy in their underlying *terroir*. Baptiste Grangeon, farms solely old vine grenache in two distinct parcels for this project, le Grand Pin and la Guigasse. They sit up at the highest elevation in the appellation, flanking the vines of Château Rayas and Pignan. Importer Peter Weygandt co-directs this project, with an aim towards making both wines along the lines that the late Jacques Reynaud practiced during his long career at nearby Château Rayas, so the stems are retained for fermentation, solely indigenous yeasts are used and the wines are raised in a wide range of older *foudres*. The le Grand Vin parcel (which lies next to the vines of Pignan) is picked a bit later, so the 2016 version comes in at a full fifteen percent octane, but offers up vibrancy and precision in its complex bouquet of raspberries, pepper, smoked game, a beautiful base of soil tones, *garrigue* and a topnote of lavender. On the

palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and beautifully structured, with superb depth at the core, excellent soil signature, ripe, firm tannins and just a whisper of heat perking up the long and complex finish. This carries its alcohol very well, and is a superb, young example of Châteauneuf du Pape. 2022-2055. **92+**.

2016 Châteauneuf du Pape “la Guigasse”- Chapelle St. Theodoric

The grenache vines in la Guigasse range from fifty to one hundred years of age, again planted on pure sand, and the wine is vinified and raised in the style of Jacques Reynaud during his days at Château Rayas (whole cluster fermentations and *elevage* in a wide variety of old cooperage. The 2016 la Guigasse is ripe, coming in at fifteen percent octane, but offering up noteworthy purity on the nose and remaining quite cool on the backend of the palate. The bouquet is youthfully complex, offering up a promising blend of raspberries, a touch of fruitcake, pepper, roasted meats, rosemary, thyme, lavender, a fine base of soil and plenty of bonfire-like smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and full-bodied, with a very elegant personality, a bottomless core of old vine fruit, great soil inflection and a long, ripely tannic and very well-balanced finish. This too is simply outstanding young Châteauneuf du Pape! 2023-2055. **92**.

2015 Châteauneuf du Pape “le Grand Pin”- Chapelle St. Theodoric

The 2015 le Grand Pin bottling from Chapelle St. Theodoric is a point lower in octane than the excellent 2016 version, coming in at an even fourteen percent and offering up even more aromatic complexity than the younger vintage, as there are a wide array of beautiful spice and botanical shadings that are unlocked at fourteen percent, but subsumed in the flashier fruit tones of the 2016. Scents of raspberries, blood orange, bonfire, cloves, fresh thyme and rosemary, gorgeous, almost stony soil tones (even though this *terroir* is all sand!), spit-roasted meats and other savory elements in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, deep and very transparent in personality, with fine depth at the core, fine-grained tannins and a long, tangy and very complex finish. This does not have the sheer volume of fruit at the core of most Châteauneufs today and I am sure that some fanciers of the appellation would call this wine “light”, but that is emphatically not the case, the wine is just properly buttoned up today behind its fine structural chassis and needs bottle age to start to blossom. Once it opens, it is going to be flat out brilliant! 2025-2065. **94**.

1978 Châteauneuf du Pape- Château la Nerthe

La Nerthe has one of the top *terroirs* in the appellation, but I did not taste the wines from the estate with any frequency in my very earliest days in the wine trade, so I do not know how their reputation for quality was back in this era. However, though this was not a great 1978 Châteauneuf du Pape, it was a very good one and still drinking quite nicely, offering up a complex and tertiary bouquet of desiccated cherries, a touch of spiced meats, cloves, cigar wrapper, a good base of soil and a topnote of dried eucalyptus. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and still *à point*, with lovely transparency down to the soil, a good core and fine focus and grip on the long and silky finish. The tannins here have melted away, but the wine still has good balance and will continue to drink nicely for many years to come. 2019-2035. **90**.

And A Few of Very Worthy Bandols

2018 Bandol Rosé- Domaine La Bastide Blanche

The *cépages* of the 2018 Bandol Rosé from Domaine La Bastide Blanche is seventy-one percent mourvèdre, fourteen percent grenache, twelve percent cinsault and three percent clairette. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a complex blend of strawberries, melon, rose petals, a beautiful base of soil tones and a gentle savory note on top that recalls wild fennel. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and nicely soil-driven, with lovely grip and balance, a nice touch of vinosity on the backend and a long, complex finish. The acids here are good, framing acids, but will probably not carry the wine too many years in the future, so drink this beautiful bottle of Bandol Rosé in its vivacious youth. 2019-2021. **90.**

2017 Bandol Blanc- Domaine La Bastide Blanche

The 2018 Bandol Blanc from Domaine La Bastide Blanche is produced from a *cépages* of fifty-five percent clairette and forty-five percent ugni blanc. The wine offers up a fine bouquet of fresh pineapple, persimmon, white flowers, a fine base of soil and a topnote of citrus peel. On the palate the wine is crisp, ripe and full-bodied, with a very good core of fruit, fine focus and grip and a long, complex finish that closes with a nice touch of backend bitterness of citrus peel. This comes in listed at 13.5 percent octane, but may be just a touch higher. This is quite a unique example of Bandol Blanc in my experience and quite compelling. 2019-2025+. **91.**

2017 Bandol- Domaine La Bastide Blanche

The 2017 Bandol from La Bastide Blanche is composed of a blend of seventy-two percent mourvèdre, twenty percent grenache, six percent cinsault and one percent each of syrah and carignan. It is a ripe wine, tipping the scales at 14.5 percent alcohol, but offering up good purity on the nose of sweet dark berries, woodsmoke, a fine base of soil, a touch of tree bark and a gentle topnote of *garrigue*. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still quite primary, with excellent depth at the core, ripe, well-integrated tannins and fine focus and grip on the long and youthful finish. This is still several years away from starting to drink well and show its inherent complexity, but it will be excellent in the fullness of time. Despite its octane, it is completely cool on the backend. 2025-2065. **92.**

RECENTLY-TASTED LOIRE VALLEY WINES THE FIRST 2018S AND A BEVY OF 2017S AND OLDER WINES



This autumn's Loire Valley feature includes some of the very first wines arriving from the 2018 vintage, which was a very warm summer that delivered bountiful yields after severe frost damage the past two vintages had wreaked havoc in the region. While the story of 2018 will be the superb second half of the summer, which ripened up a generous crop load to lovey levels of pure fruit and plenty of depth across most appellations in the Loire Valley, the summer was not without some speed bumps early on. The biggest challenge *vignerons* faced in 2018 were the very heavy rains in mid-June that triggered problems with rot and mildew that had to be controlled vigilantly, but once this wet weather passed, one could not have asked for a better growing season. The spring was early and flowering was abundant, setting the tables for a prolific crop that was very welcome by *vignerons* whose crop sizes had been absolutely decimated by frosts the last two years. From the start of July forwards, days were very warm and sunny and nights often cooled down nicely, keeping relatively good acidity levels in the grapes and auguring good things for the wines of the vintage. However, there are a couple of potential Achilles' heels to the 2018 vintage, with the first obviously being that the rot and mildew that cropped up immediately after the heavy rains in June had to be studiously controlled to make great wines. The other is that the potentially huge yields required patience at the end of the

summer, as this large crop had to be ripen up completely to get tannins and acids to ideal levels, which sometimes also allowed potential alcohol levels to also mount. While mostly it is the white wines of 2018 that are being released now from top estates in the Loire, there are already a few 2018 reds also finding their way into the pipeline and it will be interesting to see what is the general style of the red wines of 2018 will shape up to be a year from now, as more of the best-known bottlings finish up their *elevage* and are released from domaines.

Based on what I have tasted thus far from the vintage of 2018, it is pretty clear that this truly an outstanding vintage in the overall region. Of course, as the Loire is such a long and stretched out series of appellations, the vintage style varies a bit from sub-region to sub-region, but it seems very safe to say that 2018 has produced excellent wines from east to west in the Loire and there are plenty of truly stellar wines currently hitting the market or due out in the coming months. It is not that the past two, frost-damaged vintages were disappointing here, as the general quality of the wines from the top estates in both 2016 and 2017 were really quite exceptional, given how hard the Loire was hit by frost damage and other difficulties in both years. But, there was simply not a whole lot of wine around with yields taking such a draconian turn in the wake of each year's frosts. So, the bountiful crop of 2018 is very much a welcome guest at domaines in the region and it has helped to offset, to some extent, all the pain that was lavished on *vignerons* in the previous two years by Mother Nature. However, with a big cropload comes the responsibilities to let those grapes ripen up completely, which happily, was a possibility with the beautiful *fin de saison* of 2018. However, I am sure that there are some estates that may have started picking a bit too early in this vintage and did not achieve the full maturity in the grape skins, seeds and tannins necessary to make truly great wines in this vintage. So, one had to have a strong nerve as the season wound to a conclusion in 2018 and be a bit intrepid when it came to alcohol levels for certain wines, as the sugars were certainly climbing to rather impressive levels in the continued sunny days of the second half of September.

Normally, when discussing each sub-region in the Loire, I will start on either the eastern or western end of the region and work my way across from appellation to appellation, but perhaps the central area of the Touraine is a good place to start this year, as it is a very good window into the vintage of 2018 in general terms. The style of the growing season of 2018 dictated styles a bit more than customary in the Touraine area this year, where *vignerons* in Vouvray and Montlouis have had a bit more leeway in how to shape their portfolio of wines in the last decade or more, with the possibility of making a full range of Sec, Demi-Sec and Moelleux bottlings possible in most of the recent vintages here. However, the summer of 2018 is one that definitely favored Moelleux and sweeter wines this year, with Sec the most difficult sweetness level to find properly ripe grapes for in 2018, due to the challenges of getting proper physiological ripeness with the large crop loads. At Domaine Huët in Vouvray, Sarah Hwang and her team decided to follow the path laid out by the vintage's style, so they only produced a very small quantity of Sec in 2018- solely from their Clos du Bourg vineyard, with everything crafted from the Le Haut-Lieu and Le Mont vineyards Demi-Sec and sweeter in 2018 and with lots of sweeter wines produced from the Clos du Bourg as well. She noted that it was important in Vouvray to be patient and let the grapes ripen fully into mid-October or later to get the acids and skins fully ripe, and for those who decided to pick earlier, the huge yields translated into Sec bottlings that can be lean, green, fighting machines. So, there will be some disappointing 2018s

from the Touraine, to go along with some of the greatest sweet wines produced in this part of the Loire since the legendary 1989s.

Growers who had the most success here allude back to the legendary 1947 vintage in Vouvray and Montlouis as a similar growing season (based on family records and the memories of the most senior members of their winegrowing colleagues) and it is clear that there are some absolutely brilliant legends in the making coming from this region from the most successful estates in the Touraine. What I love best about the sweet wines produced in this section of the Loire in 2018 is that they are generally not wines that achieved their concentration levels through the shriveling effects of botrytis, but rather through very long hang times and *passerillage* (the dehydration of the berries while still on the vine), so that one sees very pure, very precise flavors and aromatics from these wines, not to mention gorgeous soil signatures, to go along with the bottomless depth of concentration from a great vintage. There was a very small amount of botrytis in isolated spots in the Touraine in 2018, but it has had a negligible effect on the vintage in general, in comparison to the concentration realized from the natural shriveling of the berries on the vine from *passerillage* (which also acts to concentrate acids, as well as sugars). The last vintage where this was the case was 1989, and the similarities between the style of the wines of 2018 and 1989 is quite noticeable, though the 2018s may well be even a bit more powerful than the 1989s and share a bit more 1947 personality in that regard (though, of course, I have no personal experience with how the 1947s may have tasted in their early decades). Leaving aside the fine chenin-based wines of Vouvray and Montlouis that define the Touraine, it is also an excellent vintage here for the value sauvignon blancs that are planted in this part of the Loire Valley, and the Touraine SBs that I have tasted are simply superb in 2018 and will be some of the great steals in the wine world for the coming year or two.

Moving over to the western edge of the Loire, in the Nantais, the Muscadet harvest started far earlier than in the middle Loire Valley, with some growers getting started as early as late August and most bringing in grapes in the month of September. The grapes are nicely ripe for Muscadet in 2018, but due to the hot backend half of the growing season, acids are a bit lower than in many vintages and it seems likely that the top bottlings of Muscadet will not be quite as long-lived in 2018 as in other top recent vintages here, though they still have plenty of personality, mineral drive and complexity. However, keep in mind that I am only tasting now the more entry level wines of 2018 from Muscadet's top producers and it will be very interesting to see what their higher level cuvées produced from top crus in the appellation and aged far longer on their fine lees will show when they are released down the road. But, the depth of fruit and the still lovely signatures of soil of the early 2018s show that there will be an awful lot to like from Muscadet 2018, even if the wines end up being a tad shorter-lived than in other recent very top vintages. It probably bears at least a passing mention that when I speak of Muscadet, I am talking exclusively about the top estates that hand-harvest their grapes and make their wines traditionally and with serious attention to detail. My comments are not applicable to the folks still making industrial-grade, machine-harvested Muscadet, which happily, I do not taste very often these days, as there is more than enough great and serious Muscadet being made in the western Loire today to keep me more than busy without having to dip my toes in the water of the more commercially-oriented plonk.

In the Anjou, the same discussion that pertained to the Touraine will likely be true here as well, with the strength of the vintage likely to be the sweeter wines from these lovely, chenin blanc appellations. However, at this point in time, I have not yet tasted any 2018 examples from the Anjou and am looking forward to part two of this report to start to see some of those wines. In the great red wine appellations of the central Loire: Chinon, Saumur-Champigny, St. Nicolas de Bourgueil and Bourgueil, it is still very early days for the 2018s, as most of the top cuvées are still resting in cellars and will not be released for several more months. However, I have already tasted enough of the earlier-released bottlings to start to get a feel for the red wines of 2018 and it seems quite likely that the wines here may well be a bit similar to the 2005 vintage reds. From what I have tasted so far, it seems likely that the 2018 red wines of the Loire's best appellations will end up being characterized by truly exceptional depth of fruit, fine mineral drive and plenty of ripe tannins providing a structural chassis to take them far out into the future and make them cellar treasures for the next generation. I have to assume that ripening up the tannins, not letting yields get too prolific, and waiting for complete ripeness of the bunches was still of paramount importance for making great red wines here, but there are enough really talented *vignerons* in these appellations these days to have confidence that many have done so and made truly legendary reds in 2018. My initial fears were that the very hot weather of the summer of 2018 might translate into red wines defined by elements of *sur maturité* and very high alcohols, but thus far, I have not seen a single example of red wine from 2018 that fits this description and I am extremely sanguine that these types of wines will not be part of the portfolios of the top red wine estates in Chinon, Saumur-Champigny, St. Nicolas de Bourgueil and Bourgueil.

On the far eastern end of the Loire in sauvignon blanc country, the appellations here have produced some truly brilliant 2018s in Sancerre, Pouilly-Fumé, Menetou-Salon and Quincy. These wines generally have just gorgeous fruit tones in this vintage, coupled to classic soil signatures, sound acids and excellent freshness, bounce and grip. It is going to be the most popular vintage for these beautiful examples of sauvignon blanc in a very long time, as these wines are just singing out of the blocks, but still have good structure for mid-term aging. Most that I have tasted thus far have good to very good levels of acidity, so they remain vibrant, bouncy and zesty on the palate and allow the great fruit of 2018 to show to best advantage. Though 2018 will long be remembered here for just how gorgeous the fruit tones of sauvignon blanc came through in the finished wines, there is absolutely no diminution in the underlying *terroir* of these wines and fans of the top estates here are likely to be extremely happy with the 2018s from these domaines. I have to imagine, as is always the case, that there are plenty of commercially-oriented sauvignon blancs here as well that will be far less satisfying, with the same attendant risks discussed about other sub-regions of the Loire also pertaining here in the east, with very large yields having been picked too early producing green-edged wines that are not emblematic of the greatness of 2018. But, those types of wines (call them supermarket Sancerre if you like) always lag way behind the best wines in every vintage here.

While the primary focus of this report is understandably on the first of the exciting 2018s to come out of the Loire Valley pipeline, there are still plenty of later-released cuvées from the previous three vintages in the market and available. As I have mentioned in the last couple of iterations of the annual Loire Valley report, there are truly some exceptional wines from the two frost-damaged vintages of 2016 and 2017 now in the market and the wines are often absolutely superb. Remember that frost damage is not like hail or mildew damage- it does not taint the

wines, as its principal problem is one of drastically reduced yields. Certainly some vines were damaged as well from the frosts, and given that there were two extremely-frosted vintages back to back in many sectors of the Loire, the vines will have needed some time to bounce back to full health, but at least in terms of the quality of the wines from 2016 and 2017, the major problem is that there are not a lot of bottles out there of any given cuvée. However, as I hope the notes below will attest, there are a lot of really high quality examples still available in the market from both of these two vintages and they deserve one's attention. In the world of red wines from the Loire, there continue to be still some later released 2015s out there as well and this was another first class vintage for the cellar and these wines will often offer excellent value. I even tasted a few new releases from Muscadet from the 2013 and 2015 vintages that had witnessed very extended aging on their fine lees and which are not to be missed by lovers of these briny, gorgeously food-friendly white wines!

The following notes are once again organized from west to east, starting with Muscadet and eventually winding their way over to Sancerre. Within each sub-region section, the wines are listed chronologically by vintage, and then alphabetically by producer. As I still had at least four or five cases of Loire samples that I could not get to in time for the deadline of this new issue (due to my upper respiratory infection that stopped my tasting ten days ahead of schedule), I still have a fine core of wines waiting to form the foundation for the next report on the Loire and I will get to those wines as soon as I get back from Burgundy at the end of November. Though the report is more than twenty-five pages in length, it feels very incomplete to me this year, given how many excellent bottles remain in my cellar un-tasted, not to mention the couple of importers with exceptional Loire Valley portfolios that I could not get to in time for inclusion here. As the 2018s are rolling now in the pipeline and many of the very best cuvées are due out in the next several months, I will be working diligently to get out a Part Two on the Loire Valley as soon as humanly possible!

Muscadet

2018 Muscadet et Sèvre Maine “Granite”- Domaine de l'Écu

Domaine de l'Écu's 2018 Granite bottling of Muscadet is far more mineral in personality than the lovely Orthogneiss cuvée, but it shares the same lovely and totally inviting personality out of the blocks. The bouquet offers up a classic mix of bread fruit, briny oceanic tones, a marvelous base of wet stone minerality, a touch of straw and a lovely dollop of leesy nuttiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a fine core, excellent mineral drive, perfectly respectable acids for the relative near-term and a long, focused and classy finish. Again, this is a 2018 that will not make old bones, but will deliver plenty of pleasure while at its peak. 2018-2030. **92.**

2018 Muscadet et Sèvre Maine “Orthogneiss”- Domaine de l'Écu

The 2018 Muscadet “Orthogneiss” from Domaine de l'Écu is beautifully complex aromatically, offering up a lovely blend of lemon, white flowers, a touch of sweet nuttiness from its lees contact, ocean breeze and a complex base of soil tones. On the palate the wine is crisp, medium-full and classy, with sound framing acids, a lovely core of fruit, excellent soil signature and a long, complex and beautifully balanced finish. This is one of those utterly charming, slightly low acid 2018 Muscadet bottlings that will not make old bones, but will be a great glass of wine during its prime. 2019-2030. **92.**

2018 Muscadet Côtes de Grandlieu “Sur Lie”- Domaine du Haut Bourg

The 2018 Muscadet from Domaine du Haut Bourg offers up a lovely bouquet of lime, green apple, wet stones, dried flowers and a touch of upper register brininess. On the palate the wine is nicely full, complex and succulent on the attack, with good mineral drive, fine focus and grip and a long, classy finish. The acids are a touch softer here, due to the heat of the 2018 summer, but this has all the Muscadet character one could ask for and all the lower acidity means is that it will not age quite as long as in a racier vintage. Good juice. 2019-2024. **88.**



2017 Muscadet et Sèvre Maine “les Gras Moutons”- Domaine Claude et Sébastien Branger

The 2017 “les Gras Moutons” from Claude and Sébastien Granger is from their oldest vines in this excellent vineyard and it is a superb, young example of Muscadet. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a mix of bread fruit, lemon peel, ocean breeze, salty minerality and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and very minerally in personality, with a good core, bright acids and lovely length and grip on the complex and very ageworthy finish. Given the extremely short crop from the frost damage, I am quite impressed that the Branger made both their old vine and their younger vine cuvée from this vineyard in 2017. This is a lovely wine. 2019-2035. **92.**

2017 Muscadet et Sèvre Maine “Péninsula” Vieilles Vignes- Domaine Gadais Père et Fils

The 2017 Muscadet “Péninsula” Vieilles Vignes from Christophe and Pierre Henri Gadais is a lovely and very classic example, offering up a bright and nicely briny bouquet of

lemon, bread fruit, wet stone minerality, a lovely touch of leesy overtones and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, complex and very well balanced, with a fine girdle of acidity, lovely mineral drive and a long, zesty and focused finish. First class Muscadet! 2019-2035. **92.**

2015 Muscadet et Sèvre Maine “Château Thébaud”- Domaine Claude et Sébastien Branger

The Brangers farm two parcels of vines in the cru of Château Thébaud and they age the wine anywhere from three to four years *sur lie* prior to bottling, so the 2015 is the new release of this wine. The 2015 is truly outstanding, offering up a precise and complex bouquet of lime, wild fennel, ocean breeze, a beautiful base of granitic soil tones, gentle leesiness and a topnote of white flowers. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and beautifully balanced, with lovely mid-palate depth and complexity, good acids and superb focus and grip on the long and supremely elegant finish. This is fabulous Muscadet. 2019-2040+. **94.**

2013 Muscadet Côtes de Grandlieu “Signature”- Domaine du Haut Bourg

The 2013 “Signature” bottling of Muscadet from Domaine du Haut Bourg is a late release from the brothers, Nicolas and Hervé Choblet. It was produced from old vines and spent five and a half years on its fine lees in tank prior to bottling. The wine is excellent on both the nose and palate, with the bouquet jumping from the glass in a mix of tart orange, green apple, complex minerality, dried flowers and a topnote of ocean breeze. On the palate the wine is crisp, fullish and beautifully balanced, with a good core, fine mineral drive, still bright, zesty acids and lovely length and grip on the classy finish. This is a fine example of a perfectly aged Muscadet that is now at its peak, but still with plenty of life ahead of it. 2019-2030+. **92.**

2009 Muscadet Côtes de Grandlieu “Origine du Haut Bourg”- Domaine du Haut Bourg

The 2009 Origine du Haut Bourg from the Choblet brothers is made from vines that range from thirty to sixty years of age. The wine is fermented with indigenous yeasts and then aged on its fine lees in stainless steel tanks for a minimum of seven years prior to bottling. The wine is showing beautifully at age ten, offering up a pure, complex and classy bouquet of bread fruit, gently briny tones, a complex leesy undertow, lovely minerality and a touch of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, and rock solid at the core, with fine soil signature, good acids and outstanding length and grip on the complex and *à point* finish. This is first class Muscadet at its peak! 2019-2030+. **93.**

Savennières

2015 Savennières “Fidès”- Domaine Eric Morgat

To my palate, no one makes finer Savennières these days than Eric Morgat. He only started his own domaine here in 1995, piecing together parcels in great terroirs in the appellation that had been abandoned and nursing them back to life. He has farmed organically since 2007 and has been certified biodynamic since 2012. His 2015 Savennières “Fidès” is starting to blossom beautifully, offering up a pure and complex bouquet of sweet quince, a touch of pineapple, chalky soil tones, lanolin, bee pollen, citrus peel and white lilies. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with beautiful transparency down to the soil, bright, zesty acids and great focus and grip on the long, complex and perfectly balanced finish. At four years of age, this wine is just starting to emerge from its adolescence and is entering a plateau where it is going to drink magnificently for a couple of decades. Fine, fine juice! 2019-2040+. **93.**

Anjou Rouge

2017 Anjou Rouge “les 4 Chemins”- Domaine Richou

The 2017 Anjou Rouge “les 4 Chemins” from Domaine Richou is composed of a lovely blend of eighty percent cabernet franc and twenty percent cabernet sauvignon. The wine comes in at a nicely ripe thirteen percent and delivers classic and quite classy aromatics of sweet dark berries, cassis, cigar ash, tree bark, dark soil tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, complex and focused, with excellent mid-palate depth, buried tannins and excellent length and grip on the very nicely balanced finish. This is already quite approachable and tasty today, but it has a good underlying chassis and will age very gracefully as well. I would anticipate that it will not really peak for another five years and then really drink well for at least another dozen years or more. This is a superb value! 2019-2045. **90+**.



Chinon

2018 Chinon “les Lisons”- Château de la Bonnelière (Marc Plouzeau)

Marc Plouzeau makes great wines and his 2018 les Lisons bottling of Chinon is the first red I have tasted from this highly-touted vintage. The wine is made from a parcel of fifty year-old vines and the 2018 version offers up a deep and ripe bouquet of black cherries, sweet dark berries, cigar wrapper, dark soil tones, a bit of tree bark and a very smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with ripe, well-integrated tannins, plenty of backend volume and a long, focused and palate-staining finish. This is an excellent young

wine, coming in at 13.5 percent octane and quite reminiscent of the young 2005 reds in the central Loire. It will need some bottle age to blossom properly, but it will be excellent. 2025-2055+. **92.**

2018 Chinon “le Verre en Vignon- Chais Saint-Laurent

The 2018 Chinon “le Verre en Vignon from Chais Saint-Laurent is a lovely example of the vintage, offering up a black fruity and complex bouquet of cassis, dark berries, cigar ash, dark soil tones, a nice touch of fresh herbs and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and nicely soil-driven, with good depth in the mid-palate, ripe, well-measured tannins and fine length and grip on the balanced and nascently complex finish. A fine bottle of Chinon in the making that will not take too many years in the cellar to really start to sing. 2021-2050. **90.**

2016 Chinon “les Cornuelles”- Château de la Bonnelière (Marc Plouzeau)

Les Cornuelles is one of my favorite *terroirs* in Chinon, though its combination of clay, flint and limestone tends to produce robust examples that require extended cellaring to really blossom. Monsieur Plouzeau farms fifty-five year-old vines in les Cornuelles and his 2016 version is an outstanding wine in the making, offering up a deep and very promising bouquet of in Chinon, though its combination of clay, flint and limestone tends to produce robust examples that require extended cellaring to really blossom. Monsieur Plouzeau farms fifty-five year-old vines in les Cornuelles and his 2016 version is an outstanding wine in the making, offering up a deep and very promising bouquet of cassis, dark berries, cigar smoke, dark soil tones, a bit of tree bark and a nice topnote of the spit-roasted game one can find from this vineyard. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nascently complex, with a fine core, excellent transparency and grip, ripe, well-integrated tannins and a long, tightly-knit, but very well-balanced finish. This is going to be excellent in the fullness of time, but it is a puppy today! 2024-2055. **92+.**

2016 Chinon “Messanges Rouge”- Domaine de Pallus

The Messanges Rouge bottling is essentially the “third wine” from Domaine de Pallus and meant to be a forward example of Chinon for early drinking. I assume it is produced from some of the younger vines on the property and the 2016 version was lovely a couple of years ago when I last tasted it. I tucked a bottle away in my cellar just to see how it might evolve with a year or two of bottle age and it has acquitted itself well, and now offers up a wide open bouquet of red and black cherries, a touch of new leather, cigar wrapper, a touch of menthol and dark soil tones. On the palate the wine is essentially medium-bodied today, with a nice bit of complexity and solid depth, melted tannin and still quite good length and grip on the well-balanced finish. This wine was never meant to be cellared and was certainly a tad better when drunk as intended, in the blush of youth, but it is still a very tasty bottle and very easy to drink. 2019-2022+. **88.**

2015 Chinon “les Clos des Roches St. Paul”- Château de la Bonnelière (Marc Plouzeau)

The 2015 les Clos des Roches St. Paul from Marc Plouzeau is a gorgeous, young bottle of Chinon. The wine offers up a classic bouquet of sweet dark berries, cigar wrapper, a complex base of gravelly soil tones, a touch of menthol, a dollop of tree bark and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and shows off a fine core of fruit, with impressive soil signature, ripe, firm tannins and great length and grip on the vibrant and still quite primary finish. This is a reserved and cellar-worthy example of Chinon that needs bottle age to start to

stir, but all of the constituent components are here for a superb wine down the road. 2025-2055+. **92+**.

2015 Chinon “les Pensées de Pallus”- Domaine de Pallus

I love the wines of Domaine de Pallus, as the Sourdais family in the village of Cravant-les-Côteaux are making the closest thing to Clos Rougeard that I know of in the appellation of Chinon. Their 2015 Pensées de Pallus is nicely cool for the summer, coming in at thirteen percent octane and offering up a deep and classic bouquet of cassis, sweet dark berries, cigar smoke, dark, gravelly soil tones, a touch of menthol and a judicious framing of smoky new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and beautifully transparent down to its soil tones, with modest, ripe tannins, excellent balance and grip and a long, complex and beautifully seamless finish. This is first class and very elegant Chinon! 2019-2050. **92+**.

1996 Chinon “Clos de l’Olive”- Domaine Couly-Dutheil

The 1996 Chinon “Clos de l’Olive” from Domaine Couly-Dutheil is just starting to reach its apogee of peak maturity and is drinking beautifully today. The deep and complex nose offers up scents of sweet dark berries, cigar ash, dark soil tones, a touch of juniper berry, menthol and a lovely topnote of sweet tobacco leaf. On the palate the wine is fullish, pure, complex and nicely soil-driven, with a fine core, melting tannins and excellent focus and grip on the long and beautifully balanced finish. This has just hit its plateau and has decades of life ahead of it, but it is drinking with plenty of style and grace at the present time. 2019-2045. **92**.

1985 Chinon “les Picasses”- Domaine Olga Raffault

This was my first experience with Madame Raffault’s 1985 les Picasses, which I would have to put in the good, but not great camp. This is certainly a good, solid wine, but it is just a touch weedy in personality and clearly the fruit was not particularly ripe in this vintage. The bouquet is deep and complex, offering up scents of bell pepper, dark berries, cigar ash, dark soil tones and just a hint of chipotle pepper in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and *à point*, with fine soil signature and good length and grip on the complex, but gently green finish. For those with a low tolerance for pyrazines, there is no pleasure here, but if you are a bit more tolerant of these elements, then there is pleasure to be had here. 2019-2040. **88**.

1978 Chinon “les Picasses”- Domaine Olga Raffault

I have had some lovely wines from the decade of the 1980s from Olga Raffault, as well as a surprisingly excellent 1977, but the 1978 Picasses is from a less than ideally ripe vintage and this wine never really was able to shake off its vegetal elements from indifferent ripeness. The wine is impressively deep, transparent and complex, but also weedy still, as it offers up scents of dark berries, gravelly soil tones, bell pepper, cigar ash, celery seed and a topnote of herbs. With extended air, a bit of red fruit tries to push to the fore as well, but the wine retains its weedy veneer over everything, despite its best efforts. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and beautifully transparent, with fine focus and grip, melted tannins and a long, complex finish. I have a high tolerance for pyrazines in my red wines, but even to my tolerant palate, this wine cannot quite shake its greenness. It still has plenty of life ahead of it, but it seems very likely to always stay a bit weedy in personality. 2019-2040+. **86**.

Saumur Blanc

2018 Saumur Blanc “Argile”- Château du Hureau (Philippe et Agathe Vatan)

The 2018 Saumur Blanc “Argile” from Château du Hureau is really a lovely wine, with the ripeness of the vintage playing off lovely against an excellent blade of *terroir*. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a bright and quite wide open (particularly for young chenin blanc!) blend of sweet grapefruit, quince, a touch of orange peel, lovely, chalky soil tones and a delicate floral topnote of white flowers. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with good framing acids, very good focus and grip and a long, zesty finish. This is really good Saumur blanc! 2019-2030+. **90+**.

Saumur-Champigny

2016 Saumur-Champigny “Eolithe”- Château de Fosse-Sèche (Adrien et Guillaume Pire)

The Saumur-Champigny “Eolithe” from the Pire family’s Château de Fosse-Sèche is composed of a blend of ninety-five percent cabernet franc and five percent cabernet sauvignon. Eolithe is the name for the soil the brothers Pire farm biodynamically here, which is flint embedded in iron, and their vines now range from ten to fully fifty years of age. The wine is raised in a combination of old *foudres* and cement eggs. The 2016 Eolithe offers up a beautiful and classic bouquet of cassis, dark berries, cigar smoke, a bit of tree bark, a superb base of soil tones and just a touch of menthol in the upper register. On the palate the wine is medium-full, pure and soil-driven, with a good core of fruit, fine-grained tannins and a long, youthful and nascently complex finish. This is a fine bottle of Saumur in the making, but it is pretty tightly-knit today and needs some time in the cellar to blossom properly. It is going to be an excellent middleweight once it opens up! 2023-2050. **90**.

2016 Saumur-Champigny “Tuffe”- Château du Hureau (Philippe et Agathe Vatan)

The 2016 Saumur-Champigny “Tuffe” from Château du Hureau is a fine example of the vintage, offering up impressive depth and early complexity on both the nose and palate. The bouquet delivers a classic blend of cassis, sweet dark berries, cigar wrapper, a bit of tree bark, dark soil tones and a touch of menthol in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and sports excellent mid-palate depth, with a fine signature of soil, moderate, ripe tannins and impressive length and grip on the very well-balanced and complex finish. I have no problem drinking this wine today, but it is still a puppy and will be far more interesting with a bit of bottle age to let the secondary layers start to emerge. First class Saumur-Champigny. 2019-2050. **92**.

Bourgueil et St. Nicolas de Bourgueil

2018 Bourgueil “Côte 50”- Domaine Yannick et Benoît Amirault

The 2018 Bourgueil “Côte 50” from Yannick and Benoît Amirault is a bottling I have never seen from the family domaine previously. It is lovely on both the nose and palate, with the bouquet wafting from the glass in a ripe and complex nose of black cherries, dark berries, cigar ash, dark soil tones, a touch of fancy leather and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a superb core of fruit, ripe, buried tannins and excellent soil signature on the long and classic finish. This is first class Bourgueil in the making! 2023-2050. **91+**.

2018 St. Nicolas de Bourgueil “la Source”- Domaine Yannick et Benoît Amirault

Yannick and Benoît Amirault’s 2018 St. Nicolas de Bourgueil “la Source” is another ripe and very promising wine in the making. It offers up a beautifully deep core of fruit on both the

nose and palate, with its aromatic constellation composed of black cherries, cigar wrapper, dark soil tones, espresso, woodsmoke and a hint of tree bark up high. On the palate the wine is full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with firm, very well-integrated tannins, lovely focus and grip and a long, nascently complex and promising finish. In some vintages, St. Nicolas de Bourgueil can be a bit more structurally rustic than straight Bourgueil, but in the 2018 vintage, this is certainly not true of the la Source bottling from the Amirault family. 2023-2050. **91+**.

2018 Bourgueil “Jour de Soif”- Domaine Pierre et Rodolphe Gautier

The 2018 Bourgueil “Jour de Soif” from Pierre and Rodolphe Gautier is ripe and black fruity this year, offering up a very deep nose of sweet dark berries, black cherries, a touch of tree bark, cigar ash and a fine base of soil. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and juicy at the core, with plenty of length and grip, moderate, well-integrated tannins, fine focus and a long, well-balanced and tasty finish. This cuvée is usually made to be an everyday drinker, but the 2018 vintage has really provided some stuffing to it this year and it will age quite nicely over the mid-term, as well as drinking very nicely from the outset. 2019-2035. **89**.



2017 Bourgueil “la Petite Cave”- Domaine Yannick et Benoît Amirault

The 2017 Bourgueil “la Petite Cave” from Yannick and Benoît Amirault delivers an absolutely classic bouquet of dark berries, sweet cassis, cigar wrapper, chalky soil tones, plenty of smokiness and a gentle topnote of menthol. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and beautifully suave on the attack, with good depth at the core, fine-grained tannins and a long, complex and beautifully balanced finish. This is not a blockbuster on the palate by any

means, but rather an absolutely classic example of great Bourgueil that will last for decades and decades, but should start to drink nicely with a few years in the cellar. My gut feeling is that this is the kind of wine that will put on weight with bottle age and be even more impressive a decade down the road than it is today. Superb young juice. 2024-2065. **93.**

2017 St. Nicolas de Bourgueil “les Malgagnes” Amphore- Yannick et Benoît Amirault

The 2017 Malgagnes bottling of St. Nicolas de Bourgueil from the Amirault family was the first vintage of this wine, to my knowledge, to be raised in amphora. These are primarily old vines in this vineyard, with the oldest planted in 1936, and partial replantings here having taken place in 1973 and 1994. The 2017 Malgagnes is outstanding, offering up a deep and sappy nose of black cherries, black raspberries, a touch of pomegranate, a touch of sweet balsamic tones, dark soil elements, a whisper of tree bark and a topnote of cigar smoke. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and beautifully sappy at the core, with great soil signature, ripe, well-integrated tannins and a long, powerful and beautifully balanced finish. I have the sense that the use of amphora has given this wine a bit more rounder tannins out of the blocks than many young St. Nicolas de Bourgueil bottlings. This is excellent juice, but give it a few more years in the cellar to really come into its own, as there is a great wine buried here. 2023-2055+. **92+.**

2017 Bourgueil- Domaine du Bel-Air (Pierre et Rodolphe Gautier)

The 2017 Bourgueil from Domaine du Bel-Air is a lovely, young wine, which is quite approachable with a bit of aeration, but clearly is going to be even better with a few years in the cellar to allow its ripe tannins to soften up a bit more. The bouquet is deep, black fruity and shows nice precision in its blend of dark berries, cigar wrapper, dark soil tones, a bit of espresso, menthol and cigar ash. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and nicely structured, with a good, respectable core, excellent soil signature, moderate tannins and good length and grip on the well-balanced finish. This is quite tasty today, but I would opt to give this a few years in the cellar and allow it to really blossom. 2019-2040. **89+.**

2017 Bourgueil- Domaine de la Chanteleuserie

Domaine de la Chanteleuserie's 2017 Bourgueil is really a lovely bottle, offering up a quite accessible young bouquet and impressive succulence in the mid-palate. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a complex blend of black cherries, cassis, tobacco leaf, dark soil tones, a nice touch of menthol and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and juicy at the core, with modest tannins, good acids and lovely length and grip on the complex and very well-balanced finish. This is an absolute charmer in 2017 and is drinking well from the outset, but has the depth and balance to also age very nicely indeed. Fine juice and a good value. 2019-2035+. **90.**

2014 Bourgueil- Domaine de la Chanteleuserie

The 2014 Bourgueil from Domaine de la Chanteleuserie is really starting to move nicely towards maturity, as five years' worth of bottle age has allowed the wine to start to steer beautifully on both the nose and palate towards its secondary layering of complexity. The bouquet today offers up a deep and complex bouquet of sweet dark berries, black cherries, tobacco leaf, dark soil tones, woodsmoke and just a whisper of fresh herb tones in the upper register. On the palate the wine is fullish, pure, soil-driven and complex, with a good core, lovely transparency, just a modicum of tannin and a long, tangy and still fairly tightly-knit finish. This is not a big wine, but it is really a pretty bottle of Bourgueil. My gut feeling is that this wine has shed its puppy fat of fruit and will be a bit more generous on the palate with a couple more years of bottle age, with a bit more age to allow the structural chassis to fall away a bit more, now that

the youthful fruit has settled in for the long haul. That said, it is still very easy to drink today! 2019-2040. **90.**

2005 Bourgueil “Chevalerie”- Domaine de la Chevalerie

The 2005 Bourgueil “Chevalerie” from Stéphanie and Emmanuel Caslot is one of the family’s four single vineyard bottlings of Bourgueil. The family farms all of their vines organically and bottle without fining or filtration. The Chevalerie vineyard is planted on soils that are about two feet of clay over a deep base of limestone, with the vines averaging fifty years of age back in 2005. The wine offers up a deep and pure bouquet of sweet dark berries, black cherries, cigar smoke, dark soil tones, still a touch of youthful tobacco leaf and just a whisper of tree bark in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and really shows a lot of old vine sappiness at the core, with a remarkably youthful personality for fourteen years of age, excellent soil signature, moderate tannins and a very long, complex and promising finish. Even though this is fourteen years-old, it really is still not ready to drink (like so many of the 2005 Loire Valley reds), and with some time in decanter, it actually closes down hard and goes back into hibernation! I would wait at least another five years before opening this wine and expecting it to be blossomed. 2024-2060. **90.**

1976 Bourgueil “Cuvée de l’Ecrivain Pierre Louys”- Domaine Lamé-Delille Boucard

Domaine Lamé-Delille Boucard was one of the very first producers in Bourgueil to start selling their wines in bottle, as the first vintage that they did so was in 1947! The extended family here can trace back their history as winegrowers to 1869, so they are an institution in Bourgueil, if not as well-known these days as some of their neighbors. Their 1976 Cuvée de l’Ecrivain Pierre Louys bottling is still at the peak of its powers and is really drinking beautifully at more than forty years of age, offering up a deep and complex bouquet of cassis, sweet bell pepper, cigar ash, a touch of menthol and a lovely base of dark soil tones. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a good core, still a bit of backend tannin and a long, very nicely balanced and vibrant finish. This is cruising along beautifully and shows no signs of slowing down anytime soon. 2019-2040+. **92.**

Vouvray

2018 Vouvray “le Petit Clos” Sec- Domaine des Aubisières (Bernard Fouquet)

The 2018 Vouvray “le Petit Clos” Sec from Bernard Fouquet is flat out gorgeous on the nose, offering up stellar depth and nascent complexity. However, the price to be paid for this kind of aromatic fireworks in 2018 is plenty of alcohol on the palate, as to ferment this wine to proper dryness of a Sec has allowed it to get a bit heady on the backend. It comes in listed at fourteen percent, but is probably a bit higher than this, but I have no problem with the balance of the wine and love its depth and zesty personality. The bouquet is stunning, soaring from the glass in a blaze of pineapple, very sweet quince, just a hint of honeycomb, orange blossoms, a beautiful base of chalky soil tones and a topnote of citrus peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and rock solid at the core, with lovely mineral drive, bright acids and superb length and grip on the powerful and focused finish. I am a bit out of my depth in forecasting how a stellar Vouvray Sec at this octane level might age long-term, as I have never encountered a young wine like this, but my gut feeling is that it may turn out to be timeless. 2019-2075+. **93.**

2018 Vouvray “Clos du Bourg” Sec- Domaine Huët

Because of the style of the growing season of 2018, which greatly favored producing Demi-Sec and sweeter wines in Vouvray, Domaine Huët has only produced one Sec bottling in this vintage, from the Clos du Bourg vineyard. The wine has turned out beautifully, offering up a pure and youthfully complex nose of grapefruit, quince, lanolin, chalky minerality, spring flowers and a topnote of citrus peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with lovely mineral drive, zesty acids and excellent focus and grip on the long, youthful and very, very promising finish. Often the Clos du Bourg Sec will stay open for a couple of years before it starts to hibernate, and during that early window, it is really a good drink, before closing down for the next eight to ten years, and I suspect the 2018 will also follow this pattern, though it may close down a bit brisker than other recent vintages of Sec from this vineyard. So, plan to drink this over the next year to enjoy its open, youthful phase, and then let it sleep in a cool corner of the cellar for the next eight years or so. Once it begins to really emerge into its plateau of maturity, it is going to be stellar! 2019-2080. **94.**

2018 Vouvray “Le Haut-Lieu” Demi-Sec- Domaine Huët

The 2018 Vouvray “Le Haut-Lieu” Demi-Sec from Domaine Huët is truly stunning and will be one of the great vintages of Demi-Sec from this superb vineyard. The bouquet is pure and nascently complex, wafting from the glass in a superb blend of quince, fresh pineapple, chalky soil tones, dried flowers, a hint of honeycomb and a topnote of bee pollen. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, ripe and focused, with a superb core of fruit, zesty acids and outstanding length and grip on the beautifully balanced finish. This is really good juice, though riper than the 1989 version that got me to first fall in love with Vouvray Demi-Sec. This will drink well for a year or two and then close down for eight to ten before blossoming fully and ushering in the next century! 2019-2100. **93.**

2018 Vouvray “Le Mont” Demi-Sec- Domaine Huët

There is no Demi-Sec from the Clos du Bourg vineyard this year, but the 2018 version from the Le Mont vineyard is absolutely brilliant and will make up mightily to Demi-Sec fans that there is not one from the Clos du Bourg this year to go with it. The Le Mont Demi-Sec shares the inherent elegance of the vintage that is so beautifully exemplified in the Le Haut-Lieu Demi, offering up a pure and refined bouquet of pineapple, sweet quince, a touch of orange peel, lanolin, limestone minerality and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and nicely vibrant with a good harness of acidity, with an excellent core, great transparency and nascent complexity and a very long, vibrant and classy finish. This is a great, great example of Demi-Sec in the making. Like all the 2018s from Domaine Huët, one can either drink it over the next year or two in its youth, or wait for it to really start to blossom properly from 2028 onwards. Great, great juice. 2019-2100. **94+.**

2018 Vouvray “Le Haut-Lieu” Moelleux- Domaine Huët

The 2018 Moelleux from the Le Haut-Lieu vineyard from Domaine Huët is a lovely wine in the making, showing impressive depth and early complexity on both the nose and palate. The bouquet offers up a lovely blend of apple, sweet quince, just a hint of pineapple, honeycomb, chalky soil tones, lanolin and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and complex, with lovely delineation and length, sound acids and very good grip on the refined and elegant finish. This is obviously still a baby and needs decades to reach full maturity, but I have the sense that this is going to drink very well through much of its climb to peak maturity. It is a very elegant rendition of Le Haut-Lieu Moelleux, though the ripeness of the 2018 vintage is also evident. 2029-2100. **93.**



2018 Vouvray “Le Mont” Moelleux- Domaine Huët

The 2018 Le Mont Moelleux from Domaine Huët is deeper and a bit more primary out of the blocks than the lovely Le Haut-Lieu version, but it too shares the lovely sense of elegance. The bouquet is very pure, offering up scents of peach, sweet quince, honey, chalky minerality, an incipient hint of raspberry, gentle floral tones and a topnote of lanolin. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and slightly more structured than the Le Haut-Lieu (as Le Mont so often is), with a rock solid core of fruit, zesty acids and outstanding focus and grip on the nascently complex finish. For the first twenty years, the Le Haut-Lieu Moelleux is likely to be the more enjoyable drink, as it is already more open in personality than the Le Mont, but this is a tad longer on the backend and seems likely to reach the slightly higher plateau when all is said and done. 2033-2100. **93+**.

2018 Vouvray “Clos du Bourg” Moelleux- Domaine Huët

The 2018 Clos du Bourg Moelleux is the deepest and most powerful of the three vineyards this year at this sweetness level, but it shares the same sense of refinement found in the Le Haut-Lieu and Le Mont versions. The bouquet is pure and nearly bottomless, delivering a blend of pineapple, apple, quince, honeycomb, delicate, and yet musky floral tones, a great base of soil, orange peel, a touch of bergamot and shadings of what will become barley sugar a couple of decades down the road. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and snappier than the other two Moelleux bottlings, with a great core of fruit, lovely mineral drive on the backend, bright

acids and superb length and grip on the nascently complex and very, very promising finish. This will be a legend in due course! 2030-2100. **95.**

2018 Vouvray “Le Haut-Lieu” Moelleux Première Trie- Domaine Huët

The 2018 Vouvray “Le Haut-Lieu” Moelleux Première Trie from Domaine Huët is absolutely superb, showing that beautiful concentration from *passerillage*, rather than botrytis, that promised pure magic in the decades to come. Today, the wine remains open and very, very easy to drink, with the bouquet wafting from the glass in a pure and complex constellation of quince, pineapple, a hint of the yellow plum to come, chalky soil tones, honeycomb and orange peel. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and gorgeously light on its feet, with fine soil signature, bright, zesty acids, effortless balance and great length and grip on the very, very refined finish. This will follow Vouvray’s customary aging curve of drinking well for a couple of years and then closing down into a dusty adolescence for much of the remainder of the decade only to then stretch its wings and really take flight! 2019-2100. **95.**

2018 Vouvray “Le Mont” Moelleux Première Trie- Domaine Huët

The Le Mont Moelleux Première Trie is even deeper and riper than the gorgeous Le Haut-Lieu version, offering up a very precise nose of yellow plum, apple, honeycomb, a hint of lanolin, chalky soil elements and a topnote of tropical flowers. On the palate the wine is pure, full and bottomless, but also quite a bit more nascently monolithic right now (particularly when compared to the Le Haut-Lieu Première Trie), with excellent acids and grip, stunning length and just impeccable balance on the gorgeous, but youthful finish. This is not really closed right now, but it is so young and primary that it would be crazy to start opening bottles now (other than to get a sense of what is coming down the line if one has a case or more), so just let this one hibernate from the get go. 2028-2100. **95+.**

2018 Vouvray “Clos du Bourg” Moelleux Première Trie- Domaine Huët

The Clos du Bourg Première Trie from Domaine Huët in 2018 is probably the finest of these three bottlings, but like the Le Mont, it is not the one to reach for right now, as this is still a puppy. The bouquet is pure, precise and very, very promising, offering up scents of sweet quince, yellow plum, a touch of pineapple, bee pollen, incipient honey, gorgeous, limestone minerality and a lovely potpourri of fruit blossoms in the upper register. On the palate the wine is simply stunning, with bottomless depth, great focus and grip, brighter, more “present” acids than its stable-mates, brilliant focus and grip and a very, very long, magical finish. Like the Le Mont, there is really no point in opening this wine in its youth, as it does not have the same early detail as the Le Haut-Lieu (so why waste bottles?), but this will ultimately be the finest of these three utterly brilliant Moelleux Première Trie bottlings from Domaine Huët in this great vintage. 2028-2100. **97.**

2017 Vouvray “les Argiles” Sec- Domaine François Chidaine

This wine is labeled with “Vouvray” conspicuously absent, which I assume is a reflection of some of the issues the Chidaine family had with the INAO in the not too distant past. However, as the vineyard is in Vouvray, I am going to list it here as a Vouvray (though be advised that it is labeled simply as “les Argiles”). The 2017 les Argiles is also not listed as a Sec on the front label, though this information can be found on the back label. The bouquet is excellent, offering up scents of pink grapefruit, orange peel, chalky minerality, a touch of beeswax and a gentle topnote of the honeycomb to come with further bottle age. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and rock solid at the core, with excellent acids and grip, lovely balance and a long, nascently complex and very classy finish. François Chidaine remains

one of my favorite producers in the central Loire and his 2017 les Argiles is top flight juice. 2019-2050. **92+**.

2016 Vouvray “Cuvée Constance”- Domaine Huët

The 2016 Vouvray “Cuvée Constance” from Domaine Huët is a brilliant wine in the making, but it is still very early days for this legend in the making. The bouquet is deep and pure, wafting from the glass in a blend of pineapple, tangerine, sweet quince, honey, a bit of citrus peel, hints of the leather to come, dried flowers, chalky dust and incipient smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and bottomless at the core, with outstanding acidity and grip, laser-like focus and a very, very long, nascently complex finish. This is very easy to drink already, but in reality, it is only showing a small slice of its inherent complexity and one should try to exercise patience and let it develop some of its secondary layers with bottle age. Nectar of the gods! 2025-2100. **97**.

2015 Vouvray Le Haut-Lieu “Franc de Pied”- Domaine Huët

The 2015 Vouvray Le Haut-Lieu “Franc de Pied” from Domaine Huët hails from a parcel of ungrafted vines that were planted in a small section of the Le Haut-Lieu vineyard back in 1985. Though I visited the vines with Noël Pinguet while working on my feature on the estate in 2007, this is the first time I have ever tasted a bottling from this parcel of vines. The 2015 Franc de Pieds offers up a beautifully refined and youthful bouquet of lemon, sweet quince, chalky soil tones, bee pollen, just a whisper of lanolin and a topnote of lemon blossoms. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and very elegant in profile, with Demi-Sec level of sweetness, beautiful focus and balance, stunning grip and a very, very long, nascently complex and absolutely stellar finish. Like other wines I have tasted from ungrafted French roots, there is a sense of delicacy here that goes beyond what is produced from the grafted vines in Le Haut-Lieu. Fine, fine juice in the making. 2027-2100. **95+**.

2014 Vouvray Le Haut-Lieu “Franc de Pied”- Domaine Huët

The 2014 version of Franc de Pied from Domaine Huët’s Le Haut-Lieu vineyard is drier than the 2015 version and is a proper Sec bottling. It is also starting to close down at five years of age and getting ready to hibernate for a handful of years, so it is best to buy it now and tuck it away in the cellar for future pleasure. The bouquet is starting to show the first signs of that chalk dustiness of adolescence, countering this with lovely notes of lemon peel, apple, quince, chalky minerality, lanolin and dried flowers. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and soil-driven, with an excellent core of fruit, bright acids and outstanding length and grip on the promising, but closing finish. This is amazingly long on the backend and is going to be a profound wine in due course, but one will need to either drink a bottle in the coming six to twelve months, or let it go to sleep in a cool corner of the cellar for a decade. 2029-2100. **95**.

1990 Vouvray “la Goutte d’Or”- Domaine François Pinon

I had never previously tasted the 1990 Vouvray “la Goutte d’Or” from Domaine François Pinon and this has to be one of my absolutely favorite wines from the vintage! This is not as heavily botrytized as say, the 1990 la Goutte d’Or from Domaine Foreau, but it is so deep, intensely flavored and precise that it has to be ranked at that same exalted level, despite it not being as rich and powerful. In fact, this has more of a 1989 character than a 1990 one, which is as high a praise as I can come up with for Vouvray, as 1989 is unequivocally my favorite vintage

in the Touraine in the last forty years! The wine offers up a stunningly beautiful and vibrant bouquet of apricot, tangerine, tea leaves, salty soil tones, barley sugar and a topnote of orange peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and laser-like in its focus, with a great core, bright, zesty acids and stunning complexity and balance on the refined and endless finish. Sheer brilliance! 2019-2070. 97.



1961 Vouvray “le Haut Lieu” Demi-Sec- Domaine Huët

The 1961 Vouvray “le Haut Lieu” Demi-Sec from Domaine Huët is a flat out brilliant bottle of wine that is at its absolute apogee of peak maturity today, despite it being nearly sixty years of age! The bouquet is pure and vibrant, wafting from the glass in a blaze of lemon, orange, a touch of quince, honey, salty soil tones, orange peel and a lovely topnote of heather. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, complex and utterly refined in personality, with a gorgeous core of fruit, fine focus and grip, zesty acids and superb precision on the very, very long, vibrant and elegant finish. There is not much remaining sweetness here and this is essentially a dry wine today, but with the bit of extra mid-palate amplitude still in evidence from its Demi-Sec origins. 2018-2075. 97.

Montlouis

2017 Montlouis “Touche-Mitaine”- Le Rochers des Violettes (Xavier Weisskopf)

I had not tasted the 2017 Montlouis “Touche-Mitaine” from Xavier Weisskopf since this time last year, so I was quite curious to see how it has blossomed with a bit of bottle age. The 2017 Touche-Mitaine is blossoming beautifully and is really starting to drink well now (and ahead of my projections of last year), offering up a lovely bouquet of candied lime, sweet quince, chalky minerality, beeswax, orange blossoms and still a touch of lanolin in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and beautifully soil-driven, with an excellent core, bright acids and fine focus and excellent grip on the long and complex finish. There is still a touch of backend chalk dustiness from its adolescent phase, but the wine is really starting to settle in and is awfully easy to drink already! 2019-2055. **91.**

Touraine Blanc

2018 Touraine Sauvignon Blanc- Clos de la Grange

The 2018 Touraine Sauvignon Blanc from Clos de la Grange is a project run by François Chidaine, though only his initials appear on the back label of this bottling. The wine is not bad at all, as so many sauvignon blancs from the Touraine are in 2018. The bouquet is a classic mix of grapefruit, fresh-cut grass, citrus peel, chalky soil and a touch of white flower in the upper register. On the palate the wine is fullish, crisp and grassy, with a good core, nice soil signature, sound acids and good length and grip on the still fairly adolescent finish. This is a touch more buttoned up on the backend than some of these other Touraine sauvignon blancs that I have tried from 2018 and the wine could do with just a bit of bottle age to relax. It is good, but not in the same league as the bottling from Marc Plouzeau for instance. 2019-2022. **86+.**

2018 Touraine Sauvignon Blanc “les Devants de Bonnelière”- Marc Plouzeau

The 2018 Touraine Sauvignon Blanc from Marc Plouzeau is a lovely wine aromatically, offering up a bright and complex bouquet of gooseberry, tart orange, gentle grassiness, white flowers and a fine base of chalky soil. On the palate the wine is vibrant, full-bodied and just loaded with personality, with excellent focus, cut and grip, a really good core for this level and lovely length on the complex finish. The extra ripeness of the 2018 vintage is very much evident here in the depth and length, but this wine also has a very good girdle of acidity and is a flat out steal in 2018. Buy it by the case and pat yourself on the back for the next few years! 2019-2024. **90.**

2018 Sauvignon Blanc “Moulin des Vrillères”- Domaine Kévin et Christian Lauverjat

The 2018 Sauvignon Blanc “Moulin des Vrillères” from Kévin et Christian Lauverjat is a really fine example, offering up all of the ripe and exuberant fruit of the vintage, tied to a lovely base of soil. The bouquet jumps from the glass in a mix of green apple, tart orange, fresh-cut grass, a very good base of soil and a topnote of spring flowers. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and succulent, with a good core, perfectly respectable complexity and a long, vibrant and tasty finish. This delivers good bang for the buck! 2019-2023. **88.**

Cheverny Blanc and Friends

2017 Phyllade- Domaine l’Epicourchois (Luc Percher)

The Phyllade bottling from Luc Percher is comprised entirely of chenin blanc, grown organically on schist soils. The 2017 Phyllade offers up a deep and youthful bouquet of quince, grapefruit, chalky soil tones, a touch of mousiness, lanolin, incipient notes of honeycomb and a lovely base of soil tones. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and currently in its

adolescent phase of reticence, but with a very good core of fruit, fine soil signature and plenty of length and grip on the finish. The raw materials here are very good, but this wine is in that closed, chunky phase of chenin blanc where it is curled up on itself and hard to get a real read on when it will start to blossom. My gut feeling is that this wine will be very good in due course, but it needs to be tucked away in the cellar for a bit to let it start to blossom. 2022-2045? **88-91?**

Cheverny Rouge

2018 Cheverny Rouge- Domaine l'Epicourchois (Luc Percher)

The 2018 Cheverny rouge from Domaine l'Epicourchois is very dark in color and shows how beautifully ripe the grapes got in this vintage. It is made from a fifty-fifty blend of pinot noir and gamay, with the vines closing in on fifty years of age for both varieties. Despite the varietal composition of the wine, it smells like young cabernet franc this year! The bouquet wafts from the glass in a deep and ripe blend of black cherries, cigar smoke, a touch of tree bark, chalky soil tones and a touch of black tea in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with a good chassis of ripe tannin, fine focus and grip and a long, nascently complex and very promising finish. This is an excellent wine in the making, but give it a bit of time for the tannins to soften up on the backend. It is going to be one of those absolute steals from the 2018 vintage! 2021-2050. **92.**

Jasnières

2017 Jasnières "Sec"- Domaine de la Roche Bleue

The 2017 Jasnières "Sec" from Domaine de la Roche Bleue is a lovely example of chenin blanc, made from vines that range from ten to thirty years of age. The wine is barrel-fermented in older casks (with the exception of the youngest vines, which do their *elevage* in stainless steel tanks) and offers up a deep, complex and exotic bouquet of candied lime peel, quince, pineapple and a fine base of soil tones. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and complex, with a fine base of dusty soil tones, precise fruit tones and very good length and grip on the well-balanced finish. This has a bit of the adolescent dustiness of young Chenin Blanc, which will diminish with a bit of bottle age, but is still in a subordinate role in the wine out of the blocks. 2019-2030. **88.**

2016 Jasnières "le Clos des Molières" Sec- Domaine de la Roche Bleue

Sébastien Cornille is the proprietor of the Domaine de la Roche Bleue, though he is originally from Sancerre. His le Clos des Molières is from one of the prized *lie à dits* in the appellation, and Sébastien raises the wine for one year in old casks, followed by six months in stainless steel prior to bottling. The wine is deeper and more complex on the nose than the regular bottling of Jasnières, wafting from the glass in a complex blend of apple, quince, chalky soil tones, a hint of honeycomb and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very nicely balanced, with a lovely core, good soil signature and fine length and grip on the vibrant finish. This is good juice. 2019-2030. **91.**

Coteaux de Giennois

2018 Coteaux de Giennois Blanc- Domaine de Villargeau

The 2018 Coteaux de Giennois Blanc from Domaine de Villargeau is a lovely bottle of sauvignon blanc that has more than a passing resemblance to a good Sancerre. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a mix of lime, gooseberry, a fine base of soil, a touch of cut grass and a topnote of citrus peel. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and really has good depth at

the core for this appellation, with bright acids, good focus and grip and a long, classy and soil-driven finish. This is a fine value! 2019-2027. **88+**.

2017 Coteaux de Giennois Rouge- Domaine Clément et Florian Berthier

The 2017 Coteaux de Giennois Rouge from the Berthier family is composed entirely of pinot noir and offers up a really lovely nose this year, wafting from the glass in a mix of red and black cherries, nutmeg, woodsmoke, chalky soil tones, a dollop of fresh thyme and a hint of the cola tones to come in the upper register. On the palate the wine is medium-bodied, bright and transparent down to its chalky minerality, with a bit of backend tannin, good acids and fine focus and grip on the still slightly youthful, weedy finish. I really like the intensity of flavor and the balance here and with a bit more bottle age this will be very good example of pinot noir. Give it a few more years to blossom properly. 2022-2040. **88**.

Menetou-Salon and Quincy

2018 Menetou-Salon- Domaine Clément et Florian Berthier

The Menetou-Salon bottling from Clément and Florian Berthier was first produced in the 2017 vintage, from a parcel of thirty year-old vines that the brothers purchased in that year. Their 2018 is a very good example of the vintage, offering up a vibrant aromatic constellation of lime, sweet grapefruit, a hint of tangerine, a fine base of soil tones (clay here in Menetou, as opposed to chalk in Sancerre), citrus blossoms and a very discreet topnote of fresh-cut grass. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and focused, with a fine core of fruit, good acids and lovely length and grip on the still fairly youthful finish. This could do with six months or a year in bottle to blossom on the backend, as I get the sense that the big crop of 2018 did not ripen up quite as much as it could here. 2020-2027. **88+**.

2018 Menetou-Salon “Morogues”- Domaine Pellé

The Pellé family has been my favorite producers of Menetou-Salon since I was first introduced to the wines of Henri Pellé back in the mid-1990s. Their 2018 Morogues bottling is every bit as good as one would expect from this flagship estate in a top vintage, offering up a pure and nicely ripe bouquet of lime, tart melon, chalky soil tones, a dollop of fresh-cut grass and a topnote of orange blossoms. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and nicely succulent in personality, with a fine core of fruit, lovely transparency and grip, sound framing acids and a long, complex and very classy finish. Good juice which is a touch softer than in some vintages, but that is the nature of the vintage, and it compensates for the slightly lower acids with simply beautiful purity. 2019-2024. **91**.

2018 Menetou-Salon “Vignes de Ratier”- Domaine Pellé

The Vignes de Ratier is one of three single vineyard bottlings that Paul-Henry Pellé now produces. In contrast to the regular “Morogues” bottling above, which is raised in eighty-five percent stainless steel and only fifteen percent in *foudres* and four hundred liter casks, the Vignes de Ratier is raised in seventy percent *foudres* and larger barrels and only thirty percent in stainless steel. The 2018 version is outstanding on both the nose and palate, with the bouquet jumping from the glass in a vibrant blend of gooseberry, lime, gorgeous, limestone minerality, a nice touch of fresh-cut grass and a topnote of citrus zest. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with great mineral drive, fine acids and outstanding length and grip on the complex and beautifully balanced finish. This will age beautifully, but is going to be hard to keep one’s hands off of once it lands in the cellar! 2019-2040. **93**.

2018 Quincy- Domaine de Villalin

The 2018 Quincy from Domaine de Villalin is a very good example of this fine vintage, offering up impressive depth and complexity on both the nose and palate. The bouquet jumps from the glass in a mix of fresh lime, green apple, chalky soil tones, a lovely discreet touch of fresh-cut grass, citrus blossoms and a dollop of fresh almond in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a fine core, good balance and grip and just a touch of greenness on the long finish. I love everything about this wine except the backend, which is a touch green and perhaps shows that the large crop of 2018 was picked just a touch early here? It is a good example of Quincy, but the Domaine de Villalin bottling is often one of the reference point examples of the appellation and the 2018 is not yet singing. Give it a few more months in the bottle to start to really blossom, as I suspect the finish will come around with a bit of bottle age and the wine will be tastier in the spring than it is today. 2020-2025. 87+.



Pouilly-Fumé

2018 Pouilly-Fumé- Domaine Clément et Florian Berthier

The Berthier brothers' Pouilly-Fumé hails from thirty-five year-old vines owned by friends and the wine is raised in stainless steel tanks for eight months prior to bottling. Their 2018 version is a lovely wine, wafting from the glass in a mix of lime, green apple, flinty minerality, a nice dollop of damp grass and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is crisp,

full-bodied and zesty, with a good core, lovely soil signature and a long, bouncy and complex finish. Good juice. 2019-2025. **90.**

2018 Pouilly-Fumé “les Pentes”- Domaine Serge Dagueneau et Fille

The 2018 Pouilly-Fumé “les Pentes” from Domaine Serge Dagueneau et Fille is an excellent example of the vintage, offering up on the nose precise and ripe fruit tones of gooseberry, lime peel, damp grass, flinty minerality and a nice touch of citrus zest in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and nicely grassy in personality, with an excellent core, good mineral drive, sound acids and lovely focus and grip on the nascently complex finish. This is one 2018 that will be even better with a year or two of bottle age. 2019-2030. **91.**

2018 La Centenaire- Domaine Serge Dagueneau et Fille

The 2018 La Centenaire from Serge and Valerie Dagueneau is actually the 109th vintage for these venerable old Chasselas vines. The wine is so beautifully mineral in its aromatic composition of white peach, apple, very complex, flinty minerality, white flowers and a topnote of citrus zest. On the palate the wine is deep, crisp, full-bodied and very, very long and complex on the backend, with a lovely core of fruit and excellent focus and grip. What I love about this wine that it is an absolutely classic expression of the underlying *terroir* of Pouilly-Fumé, but with completely different fruit and floral tones to go with the minerality, due to the different grape variety. This is great wine! 2019-2030+. **92+.**

2018 Pouilly-Fumé “Florilège”- Jonathan Didier Pabiot

Jonathan Didier Pabiot farms his vines organically and is in the process of converting everything over to biodynamics. The 2018 Pouilly-Fumé “Florilège” from Jonathan is his entry level bottling and is lovely in this fine vintage. It offers up a bright and complex bouquet of lime, gooseberry, smoky overtones, damp grass, a hint of petrol and a beautiful base of minerality. On the palate the wine is bright, focused and full-bodied, with a superb core of fruit, lovely mineral drive, bright acids and excellent length and grip on the complex and very classy finish. Jonathan makes two higher end cuvées of Pouilly-Fumé, Eurythmie and Predilection, which I am yet to taste, but if they are a step up from his excellent Florilège bottling, then they are high up on my “to do list”! 2019-2026. **91+.**

2016 Pouilly-Fumé “Clos des Chaudoux”- Domaine Serge Dagueneau et Fille

The 2016 Clos des Chaudoux Domaine Serge and Valerie Dagueneau is an outstanding bottle of Pouilly-Fumé. This is unique in the family’s lineup, as these fifty-five year-old sauvignon blanc vines are actually planted on *terres blanches* limestone, rather than flint. The wine is quite tropical in its fruit complexion in 2016, offering up notes of pineapple, tangerine, just a touch of damp grass, beautiful chalky minerality and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and complex, with plenty of secondary development already showing, but coupled to a good girdle of acidity and plenty of cut and grip on the long finish. With the frosts of 2016, this wine may be just a touch idiosyncratically styled in this vintage, but it has depth, *beaucoup*s complexity and impressive backend length. I decanted the wine to let it blossom and consume some of its initial aromatic oddities, and I really liked the wine after that. It is never going to make you forget a great vintage of Didier Dagueneau’s Pur Sang, but it is loaded with personality all the same! 2019-2030. **91.**

Sancerre Blanc

2018 Sancerre “les Terres Blanches”- Domaine Chevreau (Crezancy)

Nicolas Chevreau is a young winegrower making lovely Sancerre. His 2018 Terres Blanches bottling delivers a refined bouquet of lime, green apple, limestone minerality, spring flowers and just a whisper of grassiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and classy, with a good core of fruit, excellent soil signature, bright acids and very good length and grip on the still fairly youthful finish. This is a fine example. 2019-2028. **91.**

2018 Sancerre “le Mont”- Maison Foucher Lebrun (Alligny-Cosne)

The 2018 Sancerre “le Mont” from Maison Foucher Lebrun is a good, juicy example of the vintage, offering up a complex bouquet of gooseberry, lime peel, smoke, fresh-cut grass, a good base of soil and a topnote of citrus zest. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and focused, with a good core, fine transparency and a long, tasty finish. This is still a tad on the young side, but is already drinking nicely and will be even better with another six months in the bottle. 2019-2025. **90.**

2018 Sancerre- Domaine Karine Lauverjat (Sury en Vaux)

The 2018 Sancerre from Karine Lauverjat is surprisingly low octane for the ripe year of 2018, coming in at only 12.7 percent octane and offering up a bright and quite classic bouquet of lime, gooseberry, fresh-cut grass, citrus peel and a fine base of chalky minerality. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and just lovely from start to finish, with a good core, fine soil signature, bright acids and fine length and grip on the poised and classy finish. This is a delicious example of Sancerre. 2019-2025. **91.**

2018 Sancerre “Vieilles Vignes”- Domaine Pierre Morin (Bué)

The 2018 Sancerre “Vieilles Vignes” from Pierre Morin is outstanding and a classic example of the *terres blanches* soils of Bué, coupled with just lovely and generous fruit tones emblematic of the vintage. The bouquet hops from the glass in a mix of green apple, gooseberry, spring flowers, gentle grassiness and a lovely foundation of limestone minerality. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and beautifully balanced, with a great core of fruit, sound acids and fine focus and grip on the complex finish. This is excellent juice! 2019-2025. **92.**

2018 Sancerre “Cuvée les Côûtes”- Domaine Pascal et Nicolas Reverdy (Maimbray)

The Sancerre “Cuvée les Côûtes” from Pascal Reverdy is made from a parcel of fifty-five year-old vines planted on pure *terres blanches*. The wine is fermented and raised in stainless steel tanks. The 2018 Cuvée les Côûtes offers up a deep and serious nose of tart orange, lime peel, a touch of fresh-cut grass, beautiful, chalky minerality and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and more structured out of the blocks than a lot of the 2018 Sancerre, with a lovely core, excellent mineral drive and cut and a long, well-balanced and nascently complex finish. This is one of the few wines from this appellation in 2018 that will really be better with a bit of bottle age. 2020-2030+. **91.**

2017 Sancerre “les Angeslots” V. V.- Dom. Pascal et Nicolas Reverdy (Maimbray)

The Sancerre “les Angeslots” Vieilles Vignes bottling from Pascal Reverdy is made from vines that are more than seventy years of age. The wine is fermented in older *demi-muids* and bottled unfiltered. The 2017 les Angeslots is simply stunning today, as it is really starting to blossom and offer up beautiful aromatic complexity in its blend of lime, green apple, tart orange, chalky minerality, beautiful botanical tones, lime blossoms and just a whisper of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full and very classy in personality, with a superb core of fruit,

excellent mineral drive and cut and a long, complex and vibrant finish. The aging in older, large barrels gives this wine a backend palate impression that is most impressive. 2019-2030. **94.**

2016 Sancerre “Cuvée Ovide”- Domaine Pierre Morin (Bué)

The Cuvée Ovide from Pierre Morin is one of his oldest vine bottlings, as these vines are fully sixty-five years of age and planted on *caillottes* soils. The wine includes fifteen percent of the cuvée that is raised in older barrels, mixed with the rest of the blend which is raised in stainless steel. The 2016 version is a beautiful bottle of Sancerre at its apogee, wafting from the glass in a vibrant blend of gooseberry, lime zest, chalky minerality, a touch of fresh-mown grass and a bit of orange peel in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and zesty, with a lovely core of fruit, fine grip and balance and a long, classy and complex finish. Fine juice. 2019-2026. **92.**

2005 Sancerre “la Comtesse”- Domaine Gerard Bouley (Chavignol)

I have never met a tougher cork than on this bottle of 2005 la Comtesse from Gerard Bouley, as it was so dense that it refused to let the bit from a Durand more than a half inch into its rock hard center, and was hard enough that when I used an Ah-so to remove it, the neck of the bottle cracked! However, the fight with the cork was well worth it, for when the bottle was finally opened, it revealed a very good bottle of Sancerre that was still not at its apogee of maturity, but climbing beautifully. The bouquet offers up a complex and still very vibrant nose of fresh lime, gooseberry, limepeel, a touch of beeswax, complex chalky minerality and a topnote of orange blossoms. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, nicely ripe and very pure in profile, with a lovely core of fruit, still excellent acidity and fine focus and grip on the long and complex finish. Fine juice. 2019-2040. **93+.**

Sancerre Rosé

2018 Sancerre Rosé “les Terres Blanches”- Domaine Chevreau (Crezancy)

The 2018 Sancerre Rosé “les Terres Blanches” from Domaine Chevreau is a really lovely example, offering up a bright and complex nose of strawberries, white cherries, chalky soil tones, rose petals and just a touch of orange peel in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and zesty, with a fine core, good acids and grip and a long, precise and gently peppery and quite vinous finish. A lovely food Rosé. 2019-2024. **90.**

Sancerre Rouge

2017 Sancerre “Moulin des Vrillères” Rouge- Domaine Kévin et Christian Lauverjat

The 2017 Sancerre “Moulin des Vrillères” Rouge from Kevin and Christian Lauverjat is raised in barrels for ten months prior to bottling. The wine offers up a very youthful nose of dark berries, woodsmoke, chalky soil tones, a bit of game, herb tones, hints of coffee grounds and a discreet topnote of oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, balanced and fairly primary today, with a good core, moderate tannins and a long, soil-driven and adolescent finish. This has good raw materials, but it is a young wine today and demands some cellaring before it will start to blossom. 2023-2045+. **87+.**

2017 Sancerre “le Mont” Rouge- Maison Foucher Lebrun (Alligny-Cosne)

The 2017 Sancerre “le Mont” Rouge from Maison Foucher Lebrun is a good young example, but it will want a couple of years in the cellar to start to blossom up properly. The bouquet is quite pure and a nice blend of red fruity and limestone, wafting from the glass in a

mix of cherries, a touch of cranberry, woodsmoke, chalky soil tones, roasted gamebird and a touch of fresh thyme. On the palate the wine is medium-full, nascently complex and well-balanced, with modest tannins, good focus and grip and a long, soil-driven finish. This does not show a lot of generosity on the palate right now, but it will in due course and be a tasty bottle for those with the patience to tuck it away in the cellar for four or five years. 2023-2045. **88.**

2017 Sancerre “Terre de Maimbray” Rouge- Domaine Pascal et Nicolas Reverdy

Pascal Reverdy makes some of the finest Sancerre rouge that I have tasted, and his 2017 Terre de Maimbray bottling is made from pinot noir vines that are thirty-plus years of age, with the wine raised in *foudres*. The 2017 is an excellent young wine, offering up noteworthy aromatic purity in its blend of cherries, blood orange, woodsmoke, limestone minerality, fresh herb tones and a hint of orange zest in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, fullish, focused and light on its feet, with lovely balance and grip, a good core and a long, nascently complex, modestly tannic and intensely flavored finish. This is approachable today, but really deserves five years in the cellar to start to really hint on all cylinders. Fine juice in the making. 2024-2055. **91.**

2016 Sancerre Rouge- Domaine Henry Natter (Montigny)

The 2016 Sancerre Rouge from the Natter family is really very charming, offering up a deep and pure bouquet of red cherries, blood orange, woodsmoke, a touch of bitter chocolate, fresh herbs and a fine base of chalky minerality. On the palate the wine is medium-full, focused and very nicely balanced, with quite respectable depth at the core, lovely soil signature, modest tannins and a long, tangy and classy finish. This is quite approachable today, but will be even better with a few years in the cellar to let the tannins fall more completely away. I really like its lightness of step and backend bounce. 2021-2040. **89.**

2015 Sancerre Rouge “Bellechaume”- Domaine Pierre Morin (Bué)

The 2015 Sancerre Rouge “Bellechaume” from Pierre Morin is made from a parcel in this *lieu à dit* in Bué that is planted with twenty year-old pinot noir vines in pure *terres blanches*. The wine is fermented whole cluster and aged in older casks for eighteen months prior to bottling without filtration. The 2015 Bellechaume offers up a superb and blossoming bouquet of black cherries, woodsmoke, gamebird, a hint of cola, a beautiful base of chalky soil tones and a whisper of fresh thyme in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still moderately tannic, with a really good core of ripe fruit, lovely soil signature and a long, blossoming and complex finish. Even though this wine is now four years of age, it is still a few years away from maturity and could do with just a bit more patience. It will be a very tasty example of Sancerre rouge with a bit more bottle age. 2022-2045+. **88+.**

CHÂTEAU PICHON-LALANDE THE MOST ELEGANT OF THE SUPER SECONDS



Château Pichon-Lalande, as seen from across the vineyards of Château Latour.

Château Pichon-Lalande is one of the Médoc's "Super Second Growths", and to my palate, it is the only wine that can compete with Château Lafite-Rothschild in terms of perfumed elegance and complexity on the Left Bank. Ironically, though there are several stylistic similarities between Pichon-Lalande and Lafite-Rothschild, this gem of a Second Growth is not situated close by to Lafite on the northern end of the commune of Pauillac, but further south towards the St. Julien border, looking out at the Gironde River and nestled alongside another of the First Growths here, Château Latour. This beautiful property was once one half of a larger estate, Château Longueville, which was eventually split up into two properties, commonly known today at Château Pichon-Baron and Château Pichon-Lalande. The proper name for Pichon-Lalande is a bit grander: Château Pichon Comtesse de Longueville de Lalande, but it has generally been shortened for daily use to Château Pichon-Lalande for more than a century. As the longer name implies, the property has seen much of its history unfold through its association and ownership by women, which is far from customary in the more generally masculine history of Bordeaux. In the seventeenth century, what would eventually become Pichon-Lalande first started to be passed down through the female side of a prestigious *Bordelais* family, as the

estate's founder, Pierre de Mazure de Rauzan gave the property to his daughter, Thérèse, as her dowry when she married Jacques-François de Pichon, Baron de Longueville in 1694. Monsieur de Rauzan was one of the most important people in the Médoc during his era, for in addition to creating what would become the Longueville estate and owning extensive vineyard land in Margaux as well (Châteaux Rauzan-Ségla and Rauzan-Gassies still bear his name), he also managed both Château Latour and Château Margaux during his career! In its formative years under Pierre de Mazure de Rauzan, the estate was known as Château Batisse. Thérèse de Rauzan de Longueville, quite uncharacteristically for her time, decided to manage the property after her marriage to Jacques Pichon, who was also plenty busy in the city of Bordeaux, as he was the first President of the Parliament of Bordeaux when it was established at the close of the seventeenth century. Eventually, their son, Joseph Pichon de Longueville, would take over the management of the château at the tender age of nineteen and continue to run it until his passing at the ripe old age of ninety in 1850.

Joseph Pichon Baron de Longueville had five children- two sons and three daughters. In the wake of the French Revolution of 1789 and the establishment of the Napoleonic code for inheritance, the estate of Château Pichon Longueville had to be split fairly evenly between all of his children, so his two sons received two-fifths of the vineyard patrimony of the estate, as well as the established cellars and winery buildings, and this would eventually become what we know today as Château Pichon-Baron. Joseph's three daughters received the other three-fifths of the vineyards, with his daughter Virginie, already having married the Comte de Lalande, taking over the responsibility of managing the new property for herself and her two other sisters. It was Virginie, the Comtesse de Lalande, who commissioned the well-known architect in Bordeaux at this time, Henri Duphot, to build the graceful château that now is home to Pichon-Lalande in 1850, and which was modeled on the "Hôtel de Lalande" in the city of Bordeaux, which had belonged to her husband's family and had been confiscated as a national asset in the wake of the Revolution. Interestingly, the château is built on a small parcel of land that lies adjacent to the vineyards of Château Latour, on the eastern side of the D2 roadway that runs through Pauillac here, rather than on the western side of the road, where both Pichon-Lalande and Pichon-Baron have almost all of their vineyards. The château was built on this plot of land, nearly encircled by the vineyards at Latour, and it predates the château that was eventually built for the Latour estate (also by Monsieur Duphot) in the 1860s. Across the street, the château which now houses Pichon-Baron was started prior to the splitting of the two properties in 1850, but not completed until 1851 and crafted by another architect than those at Pichon-Lalande and Latour.

The quality of the wines was already very high at this time, as witnessed by the newly split Château Pichon de Comtesse de Lalande being ranked as a Second Growth in the classification of 1855, only five years after the splitting of Château Longueville into two separate properties in 1850. The reputation of the wines at Château Longueville had really started to rise throughout the nineteenth century, under the watch of Joseph Pichon, when the estate was accorded the rank of a Third Growth in the earliest classifications of the wines of the Médoc. This was the same ranking that Château Mouton had prior to 1855. After the division of the Longueville estate in 1850, both Pichon-Baron and Pichon-Lalande were ranked as Second Growths in the classification of 1855, which has persisted to this day, and the only other previous Third Growth that was also promoted to Second Growth in the 1855 classification is what is today Château Mouton-Rothschild. Readers will recall that Mouton was ranked officially as a

Second Growth from 1855 until 1973, when Philippe de Rothschild finally succeeded in having Mouton elevated to a First Growth. The estate of Pichon-Lalande continued to be managed by Virginie de Lalande and her family until 1925, (Virginie did not have any direct heirs and Pichon-Lalande was inherited by her niece upon her passing- still maintaining a female lineage for the property) when the family decided to sell the property to the Miaihle brothers, Edouard and Louis, in the aftermath of the First World War.

The Miaihle brothers were veteran vineyard owners and wine merchants in the Bordeaux market and ran the property well through the difficult years from 1925 through the upheavals of the second world war, but like many of the top Bordeaux estates at this time, investment in the vineyards and cellars was fairly minimal, as these were far more difficult times for those in the Bordeaux wine trade than the sumptuous wealth that the top properties in the region exude in recent times. It was during the early years of the Miaihle brothers' ownership of Pichon-Lalande that a decision was made in the vineyards that would long come to define the contemporary style of this Second Growth, as more merlot was planted in the vineyards here to markedly increase the percentage of this grape in the *cépages* of the wine. Edouard Miaihle eventually handed over management of Pichon-Lalande to his son, William-Alain Miaihle, who oversaw the first renovations of the cellar and *chais* at the estate since his father and uncle purchased the property in 1925. This work was started in the mid-1960s and completed in time for the harvest of 1966. Prior to the 1966 renovations, Pichon-Lalande did not have cellars at the property and its *chais* was in the nearby village of St. Lambert. At this point in the history of Château Pichon-Lalande, the vineyard acreage extended to forty hectares of vines, but this vineyard patrimony would be expanded in the next major epoch of the property's history, which commenced at the end of the following decade. William-Alain Miaihle ran Pichon-Lalande from 1959 until 1972, managing the property for himself and his two older sisters. However, family squabbles eventually elevated to accusations on the part of the two sisters of mismanagement by Alain Miaihle and the estate spent six years enmeshed in legal challenges, with Monsieur Miaihle removed from the head of the property and caretaker managers brought in to oversee the estate while the case was settled. From 1972 to 1975, management was in the hands of Monsieur Lahary of Chasse-Spleen, and from 1975 to 1978, it was Michel Delon from Léoville Las Cases.

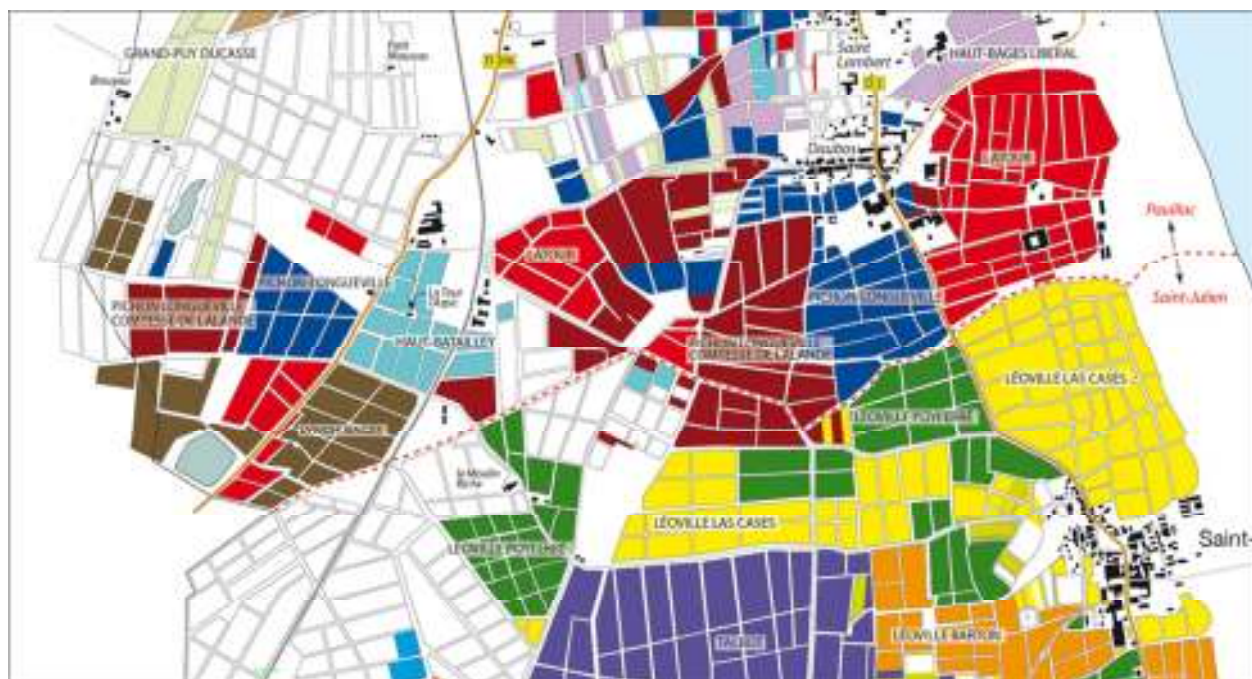
The next chapter, and we might say the modern age, unfolded here in 1978 when the estate finally passed from joint ownership of Alain Miaihle and his two sisters to one of Alain's sister, May-Eliane de Lencquesaing. Interestingly, as Alain Miaihle and his two sisters were not capable of getting along any longer, the ultimate solution was to split up the family's *Société Civile* and simply draw lots as to which of the three estates the family owned would pass to which brother or sister. Madame de Lencquesaing was the most fortunate in drawing Pichon-Lalande! May de Lencquesaing was a very able administrator of the property, as well as a peripatetic ambassador for the wines of Bordeaux in general during her long career, and she lovingly looked over her property during one of its absolute golden eras. During her tenure, the 1966 cellars were again renovated and doubled in size in 1987, and the vineyards at Pichon-Lalande were expanded to their present day level of eighty-nine hectares, as Madame de Lencquesaing added nearby parcels of vines when they became available and planted sections of the vineyard land that had not been committed to vines in her father's era. The decision taken at the outset of her family's ownership in 1925 to rely more on merlot in the vineyards than is the case with any of their other Pauillac neighbors was continued during her tenure, with the wines

of Pichon-Lalande typically about thirty-five percent merlot in virtually every vintage (1984 is one of the few years that is almost entirely cabernet sauvignon) during her years running this Second Growth estate and giving Pichon-Lalande a unique personality in the firmament of the wines of the commune.

After thirty years running Château Pichon-Lalande with great *élan*, May de Lencquesaing decided to sell the property in 2007 to the family-owned Champagne house of Maison Louis Roederer, as none of her children or grandchildren were interested in taking over the management of the property, and a new chapter at Pichon-Lalande unfolded seamlessly. The owner of Champagne Roederer, Frédéric Rouzaud, has great respect for the history of this property and the marvelous quality and style of the wines made here under the Miaihle family and the property has continued on in much the same fashion under its new ownership. Monsieur Rouzaud and his talented team from Louis Roederer undertook fully modernizing of the cellars and the *chais* at Pichon-Lalande immediately after buying the property, with construction getting rolling in 2008 and not finishing up completely until the 2013 harvest and eventually giving Pichon-Lalande a state of the art winery with which to continue to make its beautifully classical wines. The Director of Château Pichon-Lalande since 2012 has been the talented Nicolas Glumineau, who arrived after several years in a similar capacity at Château Montrose in Ste. Estèphe, where he oversaw the return to a great classical style for the wines from this property and helped to usher in the current renaissance at Montrose. Monsieur Glumineau has certainly worked at the right establishments in the Médoc during his career, as he spent all of 2005 at Château Haut-Brion and the following year at Château Margaux, before taking over at Montrose from 2007 through the 2012 harvest. Château Pichon-Lalande could not have a more talented Technical Director!

There have been subtle changes in the vineyards of Pichon-Lalande since the purchase of the property by Maison Louis Roederer in 2007, though this is a very long-term project and aimed at ultimately increasing the quality of the *grand vin* at the estate. As I mentioned above, since the 1920s, Château Pichon-Lalande has been distinguished by its high percentage of merlot planted in the vineyards, which has totaled thirty-five percent of its acreage under vine since that time. This is the highest percentage of merlot planted in the vineyards of any Classed Growth in the Médoc, with only Château Palmer in Margaux approaching this number. However, during the heyday of Madame de Lecquesaing's tenure at the helm of Pichon-Lalande, the percentage of cabernet sauvignon planted in the vineyards here was routinely around forty-five percent, with twelve percent of the vines committed to cabernet franc and eight percent to petit verdot. The higher than customary (for the Médoc) percentages of both merlot and cabernet franc in the wines of Pichon-Lalande would often give them a slightly Right Bank personality during this era, though coupled to the beautiful "gravel mound" *terroir* of the estate's vineyards. To my palate, there was often a stylistic kinship between the wines from Pichon-Lalande and Cheval Blanc (or at least I have confused the two in blind tastings in the past), due to the relatively higher percentages of both merlot and cabernet franc in the wines. Under Monsieur Glumineau's leadership, the vineyards are slowly adding a higher percentage of cabernet sauvignon plantings, with the goal to eventually bring up this variety's contribution to around sixty percent of the plantings here, with merlot only being decreased marginally to around twenty-five percent of the overall acreage (and hence retaining Pichon-Lalande's signature aromatic and flavor profile), with the balance being cabernet franc and petit verdot. The idea is to give a bit more of the

classic Pauillac backbone from a slightly higher percentage of cabernet sauvignon in the *cépages* of the *grand vin* here, while not fundamentally altering Pichon-Lalande's inimitable and cherished personality. As Nicolas Glumineau is quick to point out, "some of the most wonderful vintages of Pichon Comtesse have a high proportion of cabernet sauvignon in the blend- 1989, 1996 and 2009 are seventy-five percent cabernet sauvignon- and they are SO Pichon Comtesse." He continues, "when you pick grapes when they are exactly ripe and that you vinify them as gently and precisely as possible, you can have a lot of cabernet sauvignon in your blend while still keeping the elegance, balance and spirit of Comtesse."



This is a section of Alessandro Masnaghetti's superb map of Pauillac and St. Julien- they are highly recommended!

Today, of the eighty-nine hectares of vineyard land owned by Château Pichon-Lalande, seventy-eight are in full production and used for the *grand vin*, or the fine second wine from the property, the Réserve de la Comtesse. As one can see from the photograph of the château at the start of this article, the château at Pichon-Lalande is located neatly nestled into the vines owned by Château Latour, on the eastern side of the D2 and overlooking the Gironde River. While the winery and the château are located here, the vast, vast majority of its vines are on the other side of the road and, not surprisingly, most are contiguous to the vineyards of Château Pichon-Baron. There is only a small slice of vineyard land adjacent to the château and next to Latour's vineyards on the eastern side of the roadway. As can be seen in the beautifully-detailed map above, crafted by Alessandro Masnaghetti, Pichon-Lalande's vines are not directly across the road from the château, as these parcels were bequeathed to the male sibling's section of vines when the Longueville estate was split between Joseph Pichon's children in 1850, but the more westerly section of vineyards just beyond what are now Pichon-Baron's primary vineyard holdings (listed on the map above as Pichon-Longueville), with another parcel owned by Château Latour bounding them to the west in the direction of Haut-Batailly and Lynch-Bages. When one looks at the map, it is quite understandable why the INAO eventually allowed Pichon-Lalande to include their vineyards located over the communal boundary in St. Julien in their

grand vin and to label the wine as Pauillac, as most are simply a continuation of their primary vineyard block from the original Longueville estate separated between the brothers and sisters in 1850. However, the Pichon-Lalande parcel of vines in St. Julien that lie right alongside of Léoville-Poyferré were not part of the original Longueville estate, but were purchased in 1978 under Michel Delon's stewardship of Pichon-Lalande and which were unplanted at the time. This plot was split evenly between Las Cases and Pichon-Lalande and can be seen on the map above in the vineyard that has alternating rows for each property.

A closer look at the map shows that Pichon-Lalande (as well as both Pichon-Baron and Latour) also have parcels of vines out west past Château Haut-Batailly in the commune of Ste. Anne and near the primary vineyards of Château Lynch-Bages. The purchase of this ten *hectare* parcel of vines dates back to the tenure of Alain Miaihle as the director of the property in the 1960s. As Nicolas Glumineau comments about how today the team at Pichon-Lalande utilizes these parcels out near Lynch-Bages, the "cabernet sauvignon usually ripens a bit better here than merlot, but as we run our blending sessions blind", there is no set pattern as to whether or not the production from here will find its way into the *Grand Vin* or the second wine. He continues, "it all depends on the ability of the parcel to adapt itself to the weather conditions of each year", but in general, "those plots (near Lynch-Bages) are more often in the Réserve than in the *Grand Vin*." As he notes, these days at Pichon-Lalande, for a wine from a certain parcel to be included in the *Grand Vin* here, it has to be "perfectly balanced, powerful, aromatically precise and alive with sharp tannins and length." Certainly, the central vineyard patrimony from the original Château Longueville estate is always the heart and soul of a vintage at Pichon-Lalande, and this includes those original vines that straddle over the communal boundary into St. Julien.

The vast majority of Pichon-Lalande's vineyards are beautiful, Gunzian gravel mounds of the classic Pauillac composition, with the deep bed of gravel placed over a substrata of clay and limestone. There is also a vein of iron that runs through parts of the estate's vineyards and which can sometimes be sensed in certain vintages of the wine, such as the 1978 and 1979. As the vineyards are a bit further from the river than those of Château Latour across the D2, there is a bit more clay in the subsoils here than is the case for the vines closest to the Gironde. Roughly sixty-five hectares of Pichon-Lalande's vineyards are in a single block here next to the principal parcels of Pichon-Baron (as both are the former Château Longueville property) and these vines are certainly the heart and soul of Pichon-Lalande. Back in the earliest years of the Miaihle brothers' ownership of the property, when more merlot was being planted in the vineyards at Pichon-Lalande, it was not always planted on the best-suited soils in the vineyards, so that some merlot found its way into soils that had a higher percentage of clay and worked very well with the variety, while other merlot vines went into more purely gravel parcels that would have been better-suited for cabernet sauvignon. Part of the vineyard work being done today at Pichon-Lalande is to identify and switch grape varieties where the merlot was planted on more gravelly soils, and this is part of the reason that the percentage of cabernet sauvignon planted here is on the rise in its new era. Nicolas Glumineau comments that with all of the work they have done precisely charting the soil compositions of each vineyard parcel since 2009, "we have headed towards a restructuring which will favor a better match between grape varieties, rootstock and soils." According to their soil analysis, he feels that "this will eventually lead to the increase of the percentage of cabernet sauvignon" with the goal "a final proportion of sixty-five percent

cabernet sauvignon , twenty-five percent merlot , seven percent cabernet franc and three percent petit verdot.”

As readers are already quite familiar from the feature I wrote on Champagne Louis Roederer a few issues back, the family here is very much interested in organic and biodynamic farming and has converted more than half of its vineyards in Champagne over to biodynamic agriculture in the last decade and eventually will farm every one of their parcels of vines in this manner. This commitment to healthy farming practices has extended over to Château Pichon-Lalande as well since their purchase of the estate in 2007, and there are currently several parcels of vines that are being studied under both organic and biodynamic farming methods, with an eye towards identifying the best way to move forward eventually with all of the eighty-nine hectares of vines here at Pichon in the future. As of today, there are three hectares being farmed experimentally under various organic approaches and the same under variations of biodynamic farming, with fully eleven hectares of vines already completely moved over to organic viticulture. I have little doubt that the entire eighty-nine hectares of vines will be organically or biodynamically farmed in the future at Pichon-Lalande. Another impressive aspect of the vines at Pichon-Lalande is their average age, as the Miaihle family very much respected old vines and retained them as long as was viable, so that today, there are still plenty of parcels with ninety-plus year-old vines in them and date back to the very earliest plantings of the Miaihle brothers in the 1920s and 1930s. With the vineyard reorganization outlined above, the average age of the vines at Pichon-Lalande is going to dip for a bit, as some of those old merlot vines in gravel soils have had to be dug up to plant cabernet sauvignon, but it still remains quite impressive at forty-five years of age for the average in the seventy-eight hectares of vines that are currently in full production.

I should take a moment to mention that the labels of Pichon-Lalande have varied a bit as the subsequent generations of the Miaihle family have taken the reins of the estate. Back in the first days of Miaihle brothers’ management of the property, the labels read “Château Pichon Longueville Comtesse de Lalande” for the wines. During Alain Miaihle’s directorship at the estate, he decided to shorten the name of the property on the label, so the wines would simply be labeled as “Château Pichon Lalande”, and examples of this can be seen in the photograph further on which shows labels for the 1961, 1962 and 1970 vintages. When May de Lencquesaing took over the direction of the estate on her own in 1978, she returned to using the original labels for bottles of the property’s wines, so as one can see below in the photo of the labels for the 1988 and 1989 vintages, the full name of the property again appears on the label and this has been the case since the 1978 vintage. Though I have never seen an example, there was another interesting anomaly on the labels at Pichon-Lalande in the earliest years of the Miaihle family’s proprietorship at the estate, as for some years, the INAO did not allow the production from Pichon-Lalande’s vineyards that lay over the communal boundary in St. Julien to be labeled as “Pauillac” and so, there was an era when one might come across wines labeled as from the Château Pichon Longueville Comtesse de Lalande and bear the appellation of St. Julien! As the labels have always been white with gold print and bordering, the family resemblance between different eras of labeling may not even come to one’s attention, but I felt it would be useful to mention it, as one can come across bottles of Pichon-Lalande from the decade of the 1960s and early 1970s and find a slightly different label that what has adorned the wine since 1978.

The extensive cellar renovations at Pichon-Lalande that were completed in 2013 have given Nicolas Glumineau and his team a degree of flexibility in the winemaking that would never have been dreamed about in the era of May de Lencquesaing's very talented Cellar Master, Jean-Jacques Godin, who was hired by Alain Miaihle in 1970 and responsible for the winemaking here from that vintage until his departure from the estate in 1992. Certainly, a significant portion of the credit for the golden era of the estate during Madame de Lencquesaing's time should go to Monsieur Godin and his team, who turned out some truly brilliant vintages of Pichon-Lalande during this era. Even with the expansion of the cellars in 1987, virtually doubling their size from the first work completed in 1966, there was still not the possibility to handle the winemaking with the precision that is now possible after the most recent renovations. The new cellar excavation has now allowed Monsieur Glumineau and his technical team to move all the wines by gravity, rather than pumping, and the extensive expansion has also allowed the estate to bring in an array of smaller vats for fermenting, so that now each of the more than sixty individual parcels in the estate's vineyards can be vinified on its own. All of the smaller fermentation vats are temperature controlled, which also allows for more gentle extraction and which can only enhance the already exemplary elegance that defines the wines of Pichon-Lalande. Since 2013, there has also been an optical sorting machine in use here to ensure that only the finest quality bunches make their way into the wines. The wines of Pichon-Lalande still undergo their malolactic fermentation in stainless steel tanks prior to vatting over to cask, in the traditional style of Bordeaux.

The use of new oak has moved around a bit at Pichon-Lalande in the last forty years, following the fashions in Bordeaux during this last four decades of great prosperity, so that during Monsieur Godin's early years, the percentage of new oak was typically around a quarter. During the decade of the 1980s, the percentage of new wood was increased, and as was the case throughout much of Bordeaux at the same time, the amount of toast on the barrels was also increased, so that the vintages of Pichon-Lalande from say, 1982 to 1995, are much more marked by a smoky oak component (which happens to marry beautifully with the style of the underlying wines) than was the case with the wines from the 1960s or 1970s (which are much more "cedary" in their oak signature), or which has been the case in the new millennium. Today, Monsieur Glumineau and his team raise Pichon-Lalande in fifty percent new casks each year, with again, the signature of the oak changing back a bit to cedary elements from the more toasty oak style of the 1980s and early 1990s. The period of *élevage* at Pichon-Lalande is typically between eighteen and twenty months, depending on the style of a given vintage. Production today of the *grand vin* here averages around fifteen thousand case per year. This is down from the earliest years of Madame de Lencquesaing's era, as David Peppercorn notes in his 1982 book on the region that Pichon's production back then was twenty-five thousand case per year. The drop in production has mirrored that of other Bordeaux properties at the top of the pyramid and reflects a much stricter selection policy today for what will be released as the *Grand Vin* than was the case a generation ago. The estate has also produced one of the finest "second wines" in Bordeaux for many years, their Réserve de la Comtesse. This cuvée made its debut in the difficult vintage of 1973 and has been produced in every vintage subsequent.

Château Pichon-Lalande continues to make one of the great, utterly classical wines of Bordeaux, and the temptations that have led others to court Michel Rolland or Stéphane Derenoncourt to consult at their properties and drastically change the styles of their wines have

never arisen at Pichon-Lalande. Today, it has to be grouped with other elite estates on the Médoc, such as Latour, Lafite-Rothschild, Ducru-Beaucaillou, Montrose, Calon-Ségur, Palmer and Beychevelle as one of the beacons of Bordeaux's great classical style and the wines have never been better in the history of the property than they are today. Despite its rather unique contribution from a higher percentage of merlot in its *cépages*, Pichon-Lalande is emphatically not a wine for early drinking, and a top flight vintage at the estate needs fully twenty years in the cellar to properly start to blossom and show its inherent complexity. Due to more than thirty percent merlot typically in the blend, the wine can certainly be drunk earlier on in its evolution, but to do so, is really to waste bottles, as the complexity that emerges on both the nose and palate at maturity does not even start to arrive until a couple of decades in the cellar have come and gone. As I mentioned above, I was fortunate to drink quite a bit of Pichon-Lalande during my formative days in the wine trade, as Bordeaux was known as the greatest "wine value" in the world back when I was at the university and in the early years of my career, so the wines from this property were often those that I purchased when I wanted "something special" for a dinner or tasting, as it was rare for a vintage to cost more than thirty dollars a bottle back in the first half of the 1980s. For younger wine drinkers, this kind of pricing for a "Super Second Growth" is almost incomprehensible, but this was indeed how the wine market was back in those days! In this era, Pichon-Lalande also had a reputation of being one of the most dependable producers in Bordeaux in lesser vintages, and I drank plenty of the 1980, 1984 and 1987 vintages from this property in my early years in the wine trade, as these wines were excellent in quality for their respective vintages, were great values and were the rare years at Pichon-Lalande that actually drank with some of the complexity of maturity at an earlier age. Looking back in David Peppercorn's book, he also observes this trait at Pichon-Lalande and cites their wines as amongst Bordeaux's very finest in well in the most difficult vintages of the decade of the 1970s.

I have read elsewhere observations that the wines of Pichon-Lalande in top vintages are generally at their best between the ages of fifteen and forty years of age, but this has most emphatically not been my experience. While the estate's wines are not the longest-lived in the commune of Pauillac (that crown is, of course, worn by Château Latour), they are not particularly quick to unfold in the cellar and I would not start to really expect to find a top flight vintage of Pichon-Lalande really at its peak until a quarter century has passed, and most vintages will continue to drink brilliantly at their apogees for at least another thirty to fifty years after they have reached their summits. As the notes below will attest, wines such as the 1961, 1970, 1978 or 1979 remain still in their plateaus of peak maturity today, and vintages such as 1982, 1983, 1988 and 1990 are only now really hitting their apogees (despite their having drunk well already for many, many years), so the potential longevity of Pichon-Lalande should not be underestimated because merlot plays such a prominent role in the *cépages* of the wine. In fact, the 1986 vintage of Pichon-Lalande (one of the most structured on the Left Bank in the last fifty years) is still not even close to really mature, and the brilliant 1989 is still quite youthful in personality and has much more to reveal with further bottle age. Pichon-Lalande is certainly a wine that delivers a lot of pleasure in the glass as it climbs to cruising altitude, but it remains one of Bordeaux's true, classical long-distance runners and one should not rush bottles to the finish line in the first decade or two, as there are so many additional layers of complexity that unfold here with sufficient bottle age.



My experience with the wines of Pichon-Lalande prior to Madame de Lencquesaing taking over the direction of the estate in 1978 are pretty deep in the earlier vintages of the 1970s and in the decade of the 1960s as well, and I would note that the wines then were probably not quite as long-lived as they are from 1978 to today, except in the very finest vintages. I would suggest that this is more a reflection of their respective eras in Bordeaux, for back in the 1960s and 1970s, prices were certainly nothing like we see today and this did not afford the Mialhe family the possibility to be as strict in selection of what was released as the *Grand Vin* back in the day and this may have affected the potential longevity of Pichon-Lalande in this era in comparison to what the strictest selection practiced here today does to help define the structure and potential longevity of the wines. But, with that said, the 1962 continues to drink brilliantly, and both the 1966 and 1971 were excellent the last time I drank bottles and I have little doubt that they remain lovely and still quite vibrant wines today. So, even if the wines produced here today seem likely to last even longer at their apogees than those from yesteryear, one should not underestimate Pichon-Lalande's potential for longevity even back in those less affluent eras when selection might not have been quite as draconian as it is today, as the commitment to excellence as this property can be traced far into the history of the region.

While I have drunk a lot of Pichon-Lalande from the 1961 vintage forwards over the length of my career, I have never had a whole lot of experience with vintages from the decades previously, as I have simply not been fortunate to cross paths with their wines with anywhere near the same frequency. This is just the luck of the draw. I have enjoyed the 1959 Pichon-

Lalande immensely on the couple of occasions that I have drunk it, but I have not seen a bottle in many, many years, and I have never drunk any older wines from the estate and so do not have as much experience with those older vintages here as I do with several other properties in Bordeaux. I have little doubt that the very finest vintages of the post-war period up to 1961 continue to drink very well, and I would not be particularly worried that a venerable Pichon-Lalande from vintages such as 1945, 1947, 1949, 1953 or 1955 would still be a marvelous wine today. When I first started thinking of putting together this article a couple of years ago, I wrote to Nicolas Glumineau about the project and he suggested that I revisit the estate and perhaps he would be able to fill in a few of the holes in my tasting experience with the wines from this marvelous estate, but fate has pulled me in different directions since that conversation and I have not yet had a chance to plan a trip to the château.

Of the notes that follow, the vast majority were tasted at a vertical Pichon-Lalande tasting organized by well-known New York collector, Mark Golodetz, which he put on to support a pair of his favorite charities here in the metropolitan area. I volunteered my services as both sommelier and the main speaker on the wines for this event, which kept me hopping over the course of the evening, as it was unseasonably warm on this evening and we elected to keep the bottles down in the cellar until a fairly short time prior to service, to try and hit their sweet spot in terms of temperature when they were being served. The wines at this tasting showed beautifully from the youngest to oldest (we started with the 2000 vintage for this tasting and ended up with the celestial 1961), and as my notes below will observe, the only wine I think we erred on the side of caution with was the 1970 vintage, which probably would have benefited with an additional half an hour in decanter prior to serving, as it took a little while to fully open after we served it at our tasting). I have filled in the roster from our tasting in September with recent notes I have on other vintages of Château Pichon-Lalande and the property's lovely second wine, the *Réserve de la Comtesse*. The notes on the vintages from 2012 to 2009 all hail from my *En Primeur* trips to the region and so are barrel sample tasting notes, but as I have not seen any of these vintages out of bottle, it seemed sensible to include my impressions from those *En Primeur* spring trips, rather than leave them out. The only vintage of the *Réserve de la Comtesse* that was tasted out of bottle is the 2015, which is currently in the market here in the US and a sample was kindly sent to me by the estate's importer, Maisons Marques & Domaines. While most of the top vintages of Pichon-Lalande are covered below, I do not have any recent notes on the 2001 or 1995 vintages, both of which I would have been delighted to have tasted, as I have never had the former (but like the vintage very much) and the latter showed enormous potential back in its youth.

Réserve de la Comtesse

2015 Réserve de la Comtesse

The 2015 *Réserve de la Comtesse* is a lovely, ripe wine that comes in listed at 13.5 percent octane and offers up a quite forward and wide open personality that will make it very popular. The nose offers up a complex blend of sweet cassis, cigar wrapper, dark soil tones, a touch of bitter chocolate, judicious cedary oak tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is suave, full-bodied, focused and very nicely balanced, with a good core, fine balance and grip and a long, modestly tannic finish. This is very tasty now, but really deserves at least a bit of bottle age to start to unlock its secondary layers. 2023-2050. **89+**.

2012 Réserve de la Comtesse (barrel sample)

The golden touch of the Pichon-Lalande team is very much in evidence in the 2012 Réserve de la Comtesse, which comes in at a cool and classy thirteen percent alcohol this year. The lovely and very classy bouquet wafts from the glass in a blend of cassis, dark berries, cigar smoke, dark soil tones, a touch of tobacco leaf and cedar. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, pure and refined, with a lovely core of fruit, moderate tannins and fine length and grip on the potentially silky finish. Just a lovely second wine. 2018-2040. **89+**.

2011 Réserve de la Comtesse (barrel sample)

Pichon-Lalande is one of several properties that seems to have taken every effort to ensure that only the very finest fruit has gone into the *grand vin* this year, and consequently, there is a bit of coarseness to the second wine as a result. But, of course, this is the whole point of having a second wine in the first place. The 2011 Réserve de la Comtesse is a blend of forty-three percent cabernet sauvignon, forty-nine percent merlot and eight percent petit verdot this year. The nose is a pretty and fairly reserved blend of cassis, dark berries, coffee bean, dark soil tones and a touch of new oak. On the palate the wine is medium-full and shows a bit of backend dryness, with the tannins slightly coarse and quite substantial. It seems pretty clear that all the merlot that struggled to ripen fully in the drought conditions of 2011 has found its way into the Réserve de la Comtesse. 2020-2040. **85**.

2009 Réserve de la Comtesse (barrel sample)

The 2009 Réserve de la Comtesse is everything a second wine should be at a top flight property, as it offers up a similar aromatic and flavor signature to the *grand vin* in a style that will be accessible soon after release and offer up a lovely fifteen or twenty year window of drinkability. This should ensure that most bottles of the *grand vin* actually reach a proper stage of maturity before being broached in earnest. The nose on the '09 Réserve de la Comtesse offers up scents of sweet, dark berries, herb tones, coffee, woodsmoke, gravelly soil tones and a fair bit of smoky new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, broad and sumptuous, with a good core of fruit, modest tannins and good length and grip on the classy finish. Today there is not a lot of structure evident in the wine (as is also the case with the Pichon Lalande at this stage), but that may come with further *elevage*. A lovely drink. 2012-2025+. **87-89+**.

Château Pichon-Lalande

2012 Château Pichon-Lalande (barrel sample)

Château Pichon-Lalande is fortunate to have Nicolas Glumineau now at the head of the day to day operations of the estate, as he has moved over from Château Montrose after the 2011 vintage and has clearly hit the ground running in his first full year at this fabled Pauillac Second Growth! The 2012 Château Pichon-Lalande is clearly one of the three finest wines produced on the Left Bank in this vintage and an utterly classic and refined bottle of young claret. The wine this year is a blend of fifty-nine percent cabernet sauvignon, twenty-eight percent merlot, eight percent cabernet franc and five percent petit verdot. The deep, pure and very traditionally-styled nose delivers a superb aromatic constellation of cassis, cark berries, coffee, tobacco leaf, cigar ash, gravel and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and utterly suave and seamless, with a rock solid core, great focus and grip and a long, classy and ripely tannic finish. Think of a wine cut along the lines of the beautiful 1983 Pichon-Lalande, only deeper and even more refined! This is a glorious success and a clear indication that a combination of strict selection and an intuitive sense of the style of the 2012 vintage could produce magic! Do not miss this wine if you love classic claret. 2025-2065. **94+**.



2011 Château Pichon-Lalande (barrel sample)

The 2011 Pichon-Lalande is one of the most cabernet-dominated wines in history at this estate, as it is seventy-eight percent cabernet sauvignon this year and only eight percent merlot (to go along with twelve percent cabernet franc and two percent petit verdot). The decision to relegate most of the merlot to the second wine has clearly paid off this year, as the 2011 Pichon-Lalande is excellent, offering up a deep and complex nose of dark berries, coffee bean, cigar smoke, fresh herbs, tobacco leaf and nutty new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish pure and intensely flavored, with a fine core of fruit, lovely focus and grip and a very long, ripely tannic and very well-balanced finish. There is a real sense of elegance to the 2011 Pichon-Lalande that is a very rare commodity in this vintage! Lovely juice. 2025-2075. **93.**

2010 Château Pichon-Lalande (barrel sample)

The 2010 Pichon-Lalande is another unequivocal success for the vintage. The classy bouquet is deep, ripe and impressively pure, with a classically reserved blend of cassis, dark berries, espresso, tobacco leaf, gravel and discreet new oak wafting from the glass. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite suave on the attack, with a fine core of fruit, ripe, well-integrated tannins, good acidity and impressive focus on the long, youthful and beautifully balanced finish. A very, very fine young Pichon-Lalande the strongly recalls the young 1986 at this estate. 2020-2070. **94.**

2009 Château Pichon-Lalande (barrel sample)

The 2009 Pichon Lalande is cut from the same slinky, sumptuous cloth as the 2009 Lafite-Rothschild, which should not be surprising, as this is a style that was mastered at Pichon Lalande as far back as the 1982. The nose is deep, complex and quite ripe, as it offers up scents of dark berries, espresso, tobacco leaf, gravelly soil tones, fresh herbs and plenty of smoky, nutty

new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very plush and velvety on the attack, with a fine core of fruit, excellent length and focus and a ripe tannic and decidedly low acid finish. I cannot think of any previous vintage of Pichon Lalande that shared the 2009's combination of substantial tannins and extremely low acids- it will be very interesting to see how this wine evolves over time. My score may be just a tad conservative, but I do not have any experience with how a wine structured like this will evolve with extended bottle age. 2018-2040+? **90-92+?**

2008 Château Pichon-Lalande

The 2008 Pichon-Lalande is really a beautiful example of the vintage, and while it does not share the larger than life style of the 2009, it is a vintage that I decidedly prefer at this superb Second Growth. The nose on the '08 soars from the glass in a beautifully complex and classy mélange of cassis, dark berries, coffee bean, a touch of youthful bell pepper, tobacco leaf, lovely soil tones and cedar. On the palate the wine is fullish, pure and intensely flavored, with fine mid-palate depth, stunning elegance and nascent complexity, moderate, refined tannins and exceptional length and grip on the seamless and utterly beguiling finish. This is a very, very strong vintage of Pichon Lalande. 2018-2050+. **93+**.

2007 Château Pichon-Lalande

The 2007 Pichon-Lalande is another very good example of the vintage that could have merited an outstanding rating if the new wood had been dialed back a bit in this more *tendre* of vintages. But the wine is not bad, as it offers up a fairly new oaky nose of cassis, bell pepper, espresso, herb tones, tobacco, soil and toasty new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish, and quite suave and classy on the attack, with good, but not great mid-palate depth, fine focus and good length and grip on a modestly tannic finish that sports just a bit of uncovered oak tannin. The wine should eventually absorb its new wood completely in this vintage, but has it sacrificed a bit of mid-palate depth to the high percentage of new oak? A good Pichon, but this is one estate that could really again climb up to the pinnacle in Bordeaux if they could cut back the percentage of new oak. 2014-2040. **88**.

2006 Château Pichon-Lalande

I really like the 2006 vintage on the Left Bank and the Pichon-Lalande is a fine example. The bouquet offers up a deep and complex blend of blackberries, cassis, espresso, fresh herb tones, tobacco leaf, a nice touch of sweet bell pepper, gravel, violets and nutty new oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and quite refined in profile, with a fine, almost sappy core of fruit, nascent complexity and very good length and grip on the ripe tannic finish. This will be a classic Pichon with sufficient bottle age. 2021-2060. **92+**.

2003 Château Pichon-Lalande

Over the last couple of decades, the wine world has certainly seen its share of scandals, but one of the biggest frauds perpetrated on the unsuspecting wine amateurs was the pronouncement of the 2003 vintage in Bordeaux as a high quality year. This is utter crap, which the *Bordelais* obviously were well aware, as they have been strategically emptying out their cellars of remaining 2003s whenever the cadre of journalists arrives for each new iteration of *En Primeur*, as the vintage is already on the verge of collapse. The 2003 Pichon-Lalande is a classic example of this torrid and ludicrously overrated vintage, offering up a dull, roasted and almost fruitless bouquet of coffee bean, game, cigar smoke, dark soil tones and cedary oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, balanced and soft-centered, with broad shoulders giving way to an amazingly short and flat finish. There is just a touch of tannin remaining and the wine shows a bit more personality on the palate than it does on the nose today, but this wine is imploding and

should be drunk up fairly briskly. This bottle came from the cellars of the estate and was drunk in Bordeaux, so obviously this is the wine, not an off bottle. 2012-2020+? **81.**

2000 Château Pichon-Lalande

I had liked my last bottle of the 2000 Pichon-Lalande a bit better than this recent bottle at our vertical tasting, and I wonder if it was more a function of the context this time around, as this wine was the only really blunt vintage in our lineup, and perhaps in a different setting (like a horizontal tasting of the vintage in the Médoc?), I might have come away a bit more favorably impressed. It is not that the 2000 Pichon-Lalande is a bad wine by any stretch of the imagination, but the inherent elegance of this great estate is not self-evident in this vintage of the wine. The bouquet is starting to blossom, offering up notes of sweet cassis, currant leaf, cigar wrapper, gravel, smoke and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, chewy and rock solid at the core, with good focus and grip, well-integrated tannins and a long, powerful finish. This is a very good wine and perhaps, the customary charm of Pichon will emerge further on down the road, but for now, I have to rank it in the good, but not great vintages of Pichon-Lalande. If it develops the property's typical elegance with further aging (and which is certainly within the realm of possibility, as the wine is still quite adolescent today), then my score will seem conservative, but I am not certain that this will come to pass. 2025-2075. **92(+?).**

1996 Château Pichon-Lalande

The 1996 Château Pichon-Lalande is a fine wine in the making, but this is one of the longest distance runners in the stable of the last quarter century here and the wine is still many years away from fully softening up on the backend and drinking at its apogee. The bouquet is still quite youthful and very promising, offering up a lovely mix of cassis, sweet dark berries, gravel, a hint of black tea, tobacco leaf, smoke and cedary wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and rock solid at the core, with fine focus and grip, sound acids and outstanding balance on the youthful and energetic finish. There is plenty of inner fruit density here to carry the tannins, so I have no worries about the balance of this wine and if one is young enough, then eventually, they will have a really lovely bottle on their hands. But, patience is still very much necessary for this structured wine! 2032-2095+. **94.**

1990 Château Pichon-Lalande

Prior to our vertical tasting, it had been a while since I last crossed paths with a bottle of the 1990 Pichon-Lalande, so I was extremely curious to see how this wine had evolved with a few more years of bottle age. For claret historians, this wine is important in the annals of Pichon, for it was the first vintage that Robert Parker was less than enthusiastic about, after a red hot love affair with the property that dated back at least to the 1982. As the wine now closes in on its thirtieth birthday, it is clear that Monsieur Parker was incorrect about the wine, as it has evolved beautifully, though it is far more of a middleweight year here than one might expect from this torrid vintage. The bouquet is pure, complex and nicely tertiary today, wafting from the glass in a blend of cassis, a touch of red berry, tobacco leaf, coffee, gravel, summer truffles, cigar smoke, toasty oak and a gentle topnote of menthol. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and very elegant in profile, with a good core, melting tannins and lovely focus and grip on the long and complex finish. This is a very good wine and is now fully into its plateau of peak maturity. 2019-2050. **93.**

1989 Château Pichon-Lalande

Paired up with the 1990 at our vertical tasting, the more powerful and flamboyant side of the 1989 comes through rather dramatically. Along with the magical 1982, this is my favorite vintage of Pichon-Lalande from what must be its most successful overall decade in its long and

illustrious history. The bouquet is pure, still sappily youthful and oh, so promising, soaring from the glass in a blend of sweet dark berries, a hint of plumminess, menthol, cigar smoke, coffee bean, gravelly soil tones, chocolate and toasty new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and plush on the attack, with a great core of fruit, lovely mineral drive under the layers of fruit, ripe, buried tannins and outstanding focus and grip on the long, beautifully balanced and nascently complex finish. The last time I drank this wine it seemed like it was really starting to enter its plateau, but here at our vertical, paired alongside of the *à point* 1990, the relative youth of the 1989 is more apparent and I would be inclined to still give this great vintage of Pichon a few more years in the cellar to further unfurl. I clearly underestimated its potential longevity the last time I drank a bottle of this wine, as it has decades and decades of life still ahead of it! 2022-2075. **95+.**

1988 Château Pichon-Lalande

1988 is a vintage of good, but hardly remarkable ripeness, and in the context of all the other stellar vintages in this decade in Bordeaux, it stands out a bit stylistically. However, at least with the Pichon-Lalande, the 1988 is hardly a weak link and the wine is outstanding in its very classical styling and proportions. The bouquet offers up a lovely, cool fruit blend of cassis, dark berries, menthol, tobacco leaf, gravel, cigar smoke and a judicious foundation of toasty new oak. On the palate the wine is fullish, pure and impeccably balanced, with a good solid core, melting tannins and fine focus and grip on the long, complex and very classy finish. This does not have the exotic topnotes of a sunnier vintage, but it has a lovely base of Pichon's inimitable *terroir* and has no cause to apologize for anything! Fine, fine juice cut from an utterly classical cloth and a dramatically underrated vintage of Pichon-Lalande. 2019-2050. **92.**

1986 Château Pichon-Lalande

Three years have passed since I last drank a bottle of the 1986 Pichon-Lalande and time seems to have not touched this wine at all since that time! This remains one of the most structured great vintages of this property that I have ever tasted, and though its ultimate quality is assured, it is still not yet ready to drink at age thirty-three! The bouquet is superb and starting to blossom nicely, offering up a refined blend of cassis, black cherries, currant leaf, dark soil tones, coffee, cigar smoke and toasty new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full and rock solid at the core, with lovely detail and delineation, still a firm spine of well-integrated tannins, tangy acids and lovely length and grip on the nascently complex, but superb finish. I have loved this wine's potential since I first tasted it all the way back in 1988, but it is still in climbing mode and deserves further bottle age to allow the tannins to start to really fall away. Like the 1996 Pichon, the balance here remains impeccable and one simply will have to wait a bit longer for the tannins to finally start to fall away. 2025-2075+. **94+.**

1985 Château Pichon-Lalande

While I have been a big fan of the 1985 vintage in Bordeaux for many years and have written quite a bit about these wines in recent times, I had not tasted a bottle of the 1985 Pichon-Lalande since I cannot remember when. I sold this wine right out of the blocks in my merchant days and always liked it well enough, but in my formative years, I found it a bit too "weedy" and did not end up cellaring it for my own collection. I think this was the only vintage of Pichon-Lalande I did not buy for my cellar in that era, as I started laying in the wines with the 1981 vintage and bought them every year (even the 1984 and 1987) up through the 1989, before my buying habits (and my more limited cellar budget in those days) turned towards Burgundy. But, I skipped the 1985 and that was too bad, as the wine has aged quite beautifully and is now drinking with great style and grace. The bouquet is a superb blend of cassis, dark berries, coffee,

cigar wrapper, a dollop of fresh herbs, gravel, black tea and toasty oak. On the palate the wine is pure, fullish and beautifully complex, with a good core of fruit, lovely soil signature, melted tannins and fine length and grip on the very classy finish. This is not a powerful vintage of Pichon, but it is an utterly complete one! 2019-2045. **93.**

1983 Château Pichon-Lalande

We did not have the 1983 Pichon-Lalande in our vertical tasting, as the host discovered he only owned the wine in magnum, and given the number of wines that we had in our lineup, it seemed that opening a magnum would only result in the wasting of half of its contents as people tried to stay fresh for the older wines coming round the bend. So, this note dates back a few years to the last time I drank the 1983 Pichon-Lalande out of bottle. It is a truly lovely wine that is now fully mature and drinking beautifully. The deep, pure and complex nose wafts from the glass in a very stylish blend of cassis, fresh herb tones, mocha, cigar ash, gravelly soil nuances and a lovely base of toasty new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and classically plush on the attack, with a fine core, lovely breed and complexity, tangy acids and just a bit of remaining tannin perking up the long and classy finish. This has always been one of my favorite vintages from this era at Pichon-Lalande and the wine is drinking at its apogee at age thirty, but still has decades and decades of life ahead of it. Fine juice from a great stretch at this superb Second Growth. 2013-2040. **93+.**

1982 Château Pichon-Lalande

Blame it on the excess of youthful excitement, but my original purchase of 1982 Pichon-Lalande has now been gone from my cellar for many years, and I would love to have those bottles back today, as this vintage has just gotten better and better with the passing of time and is clearly the greatest Pichon-Lalande after the 1961 that I have ever tasted! It had been four years between bottles and this recent showing at our vertical was sheer perfection and clearly the finest showing of the 1982 that I have seen yet, as the wine offers up stunning depth and aromatic purity, tied to a lovely veneer of exoticism that even the superb 1989 cannot keep pace with at this time! The bouquet soars from the glass in a celestial blend of plums, sweet black cherries, mocha, a lovely touch of musky violet, cigar smoke, summer truffles, gorgeous soil tones, almost a hint of smoked meats, menthol and toasty new oak. On the palate the wine is very pure and precise, full-bodied and sappy at the core, with stunning complexity and grip, melting tannins and a very, very long, very pure and utterly profound finish. I have always loved this vintage of Pichon-Lalande, but it seems that it has finally reached its true apogee of peak drinkability in the last couple of years and I have clearly underrated this wine in the past! 2019-2075+. **100.**

1981 Château Pichon-Lalande

The 1981 vintage of Pichon-Lalande continues to just cruise along in its plateau of maturity and is drinking beautifully, as it has been doing already for a couple of decades! At our vertical tasting this really showed well, offering up a middleweight and intensely flavored format and lovely complexity on both the nose and palate. The bouquet is a refined blend of cassis, black cherries, cigar smoke, a touch of toffee, gravelly soil tones, tobacco leaf, menthol and a deft touch of new wood. On the palate the wine is medium-full, pure and elegant, with good depth at the core, fine focus and grip, melted tannin and a long, complex and wide open finish. Just a lovely bottle of Pichon in its prime, but still with years and years of life ahead of it. 2019-2050. **92.**

1979 Château Pichon-Lalande

The 1979 vintage at Pichon-Lalande is a ringing success and this is one of the best vintages from this era for current drinking from the estate. The deep and very refined bouquet

wafts from the glass in a mix of cassis, black cherries, cigar ash, a touch of chipotle pepper, gravelly soil, smoke, a bit of iron and a topnote of fresh herbs. On the palate the wine is medium-full, pure and focused, with a good core, lovely complexity and grip and a long, poised and meltingly tannic finish. While this wine is more of a proper middleweight in personality, it has superb intensity of flavor and does not want for more muscle. This is one of the very best wines of the vintage in 1979 and another year of Pichon-Lalande that is underrated and offers up particularly good value at auction. 2018-2040+. 93.



1978 Château Pichon-Lalande

I have drunk an awful lot of 1978 Pichon-Lalande over the years, as this was one of the current vintages of the wine in the market when I was first discovering great wine during my university days and it could be bought for about eighteen dollars a bottle back in the early and mid-1980s. Consequently, this was often the wine I would splurge on when a great bottle was required back at college. It has always been one of the very best Médocs of the 1978 vintage, as perhaps the slightly green edge to 1978 works so well with the higher merlot content in the *cépages* of this wine. This most recent bottle at our vertical was very similar to one I shared with friends in Germany last year, with the wine offering up a superb and absolutely *à point* bouquet of dark berries, cassis, a touch of tobacco leaf, gravel, iron, cigar smoke and still a lovely topnote of menthol from the merlot in the blend. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and perfectly resolved at age forty-one, with a lovely core of fruit, impeccable balance, melted tannins and

lovely focus and grip on the complex and vibrant finish. A beautiful vintage of Pichon-Lalande that is now at its apogee. 2019-2045+. **93.**

1975 Château Pichon-Lalande

The 1975 Pichon-Lalande is a good, solid example of this difficult vintage in the Médoc, but it will never be one of the star vintages from this very successful decade from the estate. The nose is the finest part of the wine today, as it offers up a lovely blend of sweet cassis, cigar smoke, lavender, dark, gravelly soil tones, a touch of saddle leather and a topnote of fresh herbs. On the palate the wine is medium-full, focused and slightly sinewy in personality, with good, but not great depth at the core, a good base of soil tones, and still some firm, slightly edgy tannins on the tangy finish. I fear this wine will always be a touch astringent in personality, as is the case with so many 1975 wines from the Médoc, but it does offer decent complexity and paired with the right dish, it is eminently serviceable. 2019-2045. **87.**

1970 Château Pichon-Lalande

Our bottle of the 1970 Pichon-Lalande at our vertical tasting in September was outstanding and I fear that I could have given it even more time in decanter to fully blossom before serving. I have drunk a lot of this vintage of Pichon over the years and it remains one of my absolute favorite Médocs from this lovely year. The bouquet is deep, black fruity and it now has a nice touch of meatiness to add to its constellation of cassis, dark berries, cigar smoke, a hint of menthol, tobacco leaf, dark soil tones, iron and coffee bean in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and fairly broad-shouldered for a fully mature Pichon, with a lovely core of fruit, fine soil signature, very good focus and grip and a long, complex and *à point* finish. First class juice. 2019-2050. **94+.**

1970 Château Pichon-Lalande (served from magnum)

One of the first great bottles of Bordeaux that I was able to drink with some regularity was the 1970 Pichon-Lalande, which I began to taste fairly often as far back as the mid-to-late 1980s. I have always loved this vintage here and this most recent magnum was simply superb, offering up a classic bouquet of cassis, dark berries, cigar ash, gravelly soil tones, cedar and a nice topnote of tobacco leaf. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and at its zenith, with a fine core of sweet black fruit, lovely soil signature, melting tannins and great freshness and grip on the poised, complex and perfectly balanced long finish. In magnum, the 1970 Pichon has a bit more depth and sappiness buried down deep and is really a beautiful format for enjoying the wine right now! Great juice. 2015-2050+. **95.**

1966 Château Pichon-Lalande

We did not have a bottle of the fine 1966 Pichon-Lalande at our vertical, so I dug back in my archives to find the most recent bottle of this wine that I have drunk. Much to my surprise, I do not have a note on it more recently than this one from 2004, but I could swear I have drunk it far more recently than that! I suppose that I have notes on it buried in a tasting book or two in my office that has not yet been entered in the computer, but I could not lay my hands on a note more recent than this one. I have little doubt that the wine continues to drink beautifully today and I would probably anticipate that it will continue to drink nicely for another fifteen to twenty years, but I reprint the 2004 note here as it was written at the time. I quite like the 1966 Pichon-Lalande, though it is not quite as complete as the beautiful 1970. The bouquet on the '66 is deep, complex and quite earthy for Lalande, as it offers up notes of cassis, cigar box, a whiff of mushroom, soggy forest floor and cedar. On the palate the wine is medium-full and displays a fine core of fruit, with lovely tobaccoey old Pauillac notes, and good length and grip on the slightly sinewy finish. This is a very tasty bottle of mature claret for drinking over the next

decade or so, but in regular sized formats it may be nearing the end of its plateau. It is slightly chunky by Pichon-Lalande's high standards, but it is still a classic glass of Pauillac. 2004-2015+? **89.**

1962 Château Pichon-Lalande

Not surprisingly, the 1962 vintage of Pichon-Lalande is far more mature than the 1961 and has probably been in its plateau of peak maturity for thirty years or more. Despite it having drunk beautifully for so long, it shows absolutely no signs of slowing down anytime soon and today, offers up marvelous complexity and transparency in its bouquet of sweet dark berries, coffee, lavender, cigar smoke, a great base of dark soil elements that are starting to shade towards the autumnal, gentle spice tones and a hint of eucalyptus in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, fullish and very transparent down to its signature of soil, with lovely intensity of flavor, excellent focus and grip and a very long, pure and complex finish. This is a beautiful Pichon for current drinking. 2019-2040+. **92.**

1961 Château Pichon-Lalande

I have only had the pleasure to drink the 1961 vintage of Pichon-Lalande on a few occasions over the years and it has always been magical. A most recent bottle was tasted at Crystal Springs and was on the table with some absolute heavyweight examples of claret (mostly First Growths) from the decades of the 1940s and 1950s and held its own admirably, and the bottle at our vertical tasting was spot on as well. To my mind, this is the quintessential mature vintage of Pichon-Lalande, as it perfectly embodies the inherent elegance of this great wine, with both the nose and palate flawless examples of refined beauty. The bouquet soars from the glass in a complex constellation of pure cassis, tobacco leaf, a touch of Lafite-like meatiness, gravelly soil tones, an exotic touch of fresh herbs (from the merlot in the blend) and a topnote of cigar smoke. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, deep and laser-like in its focus, with a lovely core of fruit, just a touch of suave, backend tannin, perfect balance and grip and a very, very long, very complex and refined finish. This is Pichon-Lalande at its best and one of the best 1961s I have had the pleasure to drink. 2019-2060. **98.**

RECENTLY-TASTED CHAMPAGNE AUTUMN 2019



This new report on Champagne is quite a bit shorter than I initially had hoped, as my time to get through the samples I accrued from the start of September to the release of Issue 83 was again impeded by both my needing to devote time to my father's healthcare and this nasty end of the month respiratory infection that kept me from tasting for the last ten days prior to my departure for Burgundy on Halloween. I still have quite a few bottles of bubbly tucked away in the cellar that should have made it into this issue and will have to wait for Issue 84, and I never had time to reach out to a few additional importers whose fine Champagne portfolios I had not managed to work into the last couple of features on this region, and whose producers I wanted to make sure to cover in this article. That said, there are still plenty of wines to recommend in the following fifteen pages and which offer a wide variety of styles and many are of truly stellar quality. There is a fine range of new or impending releases from Champagne Bruno Paillard, including their long-awaited 2004 Nec Plus Ultra bottling (one of Champagne's greatest *Tête de Cuvées* to my palate), some truly lovely new *lieux à dit* bottlings from Champagne Lombard that are alive with *terroir* and are beautifully balanced examples of non-dosé bubbly, the new release of the superb Cuvée Vendémiare from Champagne Doyard, current bottlings from stars such as Egly-Ouriet, Mouzon-Leroux, Jean-Marc Sélèque and Pierre Peters and a host of other highly

recommended bottlings. The time constraints that I have pointed out above kept me to only writing up Champagne in this feature, and the Sparkling Wines from other regions that arrived as samples over the last couple of months had to be relegated to a future issue. The wines are listed as they have been for several years now in these reports, with Non-*Dosé* non-vintage wines first, followed by sections on non-vintage Blanc de Blancs, non-vintage Bruts, non-vintage Rosés and then vintage-dated wines in the three major categories of Blanc de Blancs, Brut and Extra Brut Millésime and Vintage Rosé. I am sorry that I did not have time to prepare an index for the start of the article this time around, but it is much shorter than usual for these reports and should be fairly navigable without it this time.

Non-Dosé and Brut Nature NV

André Clouet “Silver” Blanc de Noirs Brut Nature NV (Bouzy)

I believe that this bottle of André Clouet “Silver” Blanc de Noirs non-vintage Brut Nature is from the base year of 2013, as it has a small code printed on the back of the neck label that says “LS13”. In any case, the wine is quite good, showing that lovely structural rounding from a bit of additional aging in the cellars. The bouquet offers up scents of apple, nectarine, bread dough, a good base of soil and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and nicely balanced, with refined *mousse*, bright, nicely-integrated acids and a long, complex finish. This is a quite good bottle of Brut Nature. 2019-2030+. **90.**

Bruno Paillard “Dosage Zéro” Brut Nature NV (Reims)

The Bruno Paillard “Dosage Zéro” Brut Nature non-vintage bottling currently in the market is from the base year of 2014, though half of the cuvée is comprised of reserve wines. It and was disgorged in February of 2018 and offers up a complex bouquet of white peach, almond, chalky minerality, plenty of smokiness and brioche. On the palate the wine is brisk, full-bodied and complex, with superb depth at the core, fine focus and grip, refined *mousse* and a very long, classy and perfectly balanced finish. The very high percentage of reserve wines here gives this wine already the complexity of age, but the structure here is youthful and this wine will continue to age gracefully for decades to come. A terrific Brut Nature! 2019-2050. **92+.**

Blanc de Blancs Brut and Extra Brut NV

Delamotte Blanc de Blancs Brut NV (Mesnil-sur-Oger)

The current release of Delamotte Blanc de Blancs non-vintage Brut has a first class bouquet of delicious apple, pear, toasted almond, chalky soil tones, brioche and a topnote of fresh nutmeg. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and shows off lovely mid-palate depth, with elegant *mousse*, very good balance and a long, complex and wide open finish. I do not have the exact figures for *dosage* for this wine, but I would guess it is around nine or ten grams per liter, so it may be a touch too generous for some tasters these days, but will also be a real crowd pleaser in certain circles. It is a very well-made wine. 2019-2040+. **91.**

Champagne Doyard “Cuvée Vendémaire” Blanc de Blancs Brut NV (Vertus)

The Cuvée Vendémaire from Champagne Doyard is not marked on the label as a Blanc de Blancs, though it is composed entirely of chardonnay. The wine was finished with a *dosage* of four grams per liter after aging *sur latte* for fifty-six months. The wine is from the base year of 2013, but with only half of the blend from that year and thirty percent from 2012 and twenty percent from 2010. Forty percent of the *vins clairs* for this bottling are now barrel aged in older Burgundy casks. The wine offers up a superb nose of pear, apple, brioche, almond, chalky minerality and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and

rock solid at the core, with excellent mineral drive, frothy *mousse* and excellent length and grip on the poised, balanced and complex finish. This cuvée has a great track record for aging in my experience and this new release will be no exception. It is quite tasty already, but it is a young wine and will be even better if tucked away in the cellar for five to ten years! 2019-2045+. **92.**

Pierre Gerbais “l’Osmose” Extra Brut NV (Celles-sur-Ource)

The Pierre Gerbais “l’Osmose” non-vintage Extra Brut is a Blanc de Blancs bottling composed entirely of chardonnay, though the label does not state this. The *vins clairs* go through malo and the wine is aged three years *sur latte* prior to disgorgement, and then the house holds the wine an additional six months in bottle prior to release. The wine is drinking beautifully today, delivering a fine aromatic constellation of pear, apple, almond pastry cream, limestone minerality and a topnote of spring flowers. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and minerally in personality, with a superb core of fruit, pinpoint bubbles, zesty acids and lovely length and grip on the well-balanced and complex finish. This is classic Côte des Bar Blanc de Blancs. 2019-2040. **91+.**

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Cuis Premier Cru” Blanc de Blancs Brut NV (Cuis)

The current release of Pierre Gimonnet “Cuis Premier Cru” Blanc de Blancs non-vintage Brut is from the base year of 2015, with reserve wines dating back to 2010 included in the blend. It was disgorged in March of 2019 and finished with a *dosage* of six grams per liter, after three years aging *sur latte*. The wine delivers a pretty nose of pear, delicious apple, almond, chalky minerality and brioche. On the palate the wine is fullish, crisp and complex, with a good core, fine mineral drive, elegant *mousse* and quite good length and grip on the very nicely balanced finish. This is nicely *aperitif* in weight and is drinking pretty well right out of the blocks, but like all of the Gimonnet non-vintage bottlings, it is still a tad youthful, should age quite nicely and will be even better with three or four more years in the cellar. Good juice. 2019-2040+. **90.**

Lombard et Cie Avize “Lieu à Dit Chemin de Flavigny” Blanc de Blancs Brut Nature NV

The new release of Champagne Lombard’s “Lieu à Dit Chemin de Flavigny” Blanc de Blancs Brut Nature from Avize was disgorged in November of 2018. The *vins clairs* for this bottling do not undergo malo and three-quarters are raised in casks for six months prior to bottling for the secondary fermentation. The wine offers up stellar depth in its complex bouquet of pear, delicious apple, hazelnut, *crème patissière*, chalky minerality and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is brisk, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with very elegant *mousse*, superb focus and grip, great balance and a long, complex and very classy finish. This wine has no *dosage*, but has spent enough time in the cellars before release that the acids are nicely integrated and the wine is already drinking beautifully- though with the possibility to age gracefully another twenty or more years! First class juice. 2019-2040+. **92.**

Bruno Paillard Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut NV (Reims)

The current bottling of Bruno Paillard Blanc de Blancs non-vintage Extra Brut in the market today is from the base year of 2012 and was disgorged in July of 2017, after aging for four years *sur latte*. All of the grapes used for this bottling hailed from the grand cru villages of either Oger or Mesnil-sur-Oger. It was finished with a *dosage* of five grams per liter. The wine offers up a truly beautiful, youthful bouquet of pear, apple, brioche, chalky minerality, white flowers and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still fairly youthful in personality, with lovely depth at the core, fine mineral drive, elegant *mousse* and a long, precise and nascently complex finish. This is certainly approachable today, but it is really built for the cellar and deserves four or five more years of bottle age to really start to hit on all cylinders. It will be simply stellar in the fullness of time! 2023-2060. **93+.**

Pierre Péters “Cuvée de Réserve” Blanc de Blancs Brut NV (Mesnil-sur-Oger)

The new release of Rodolphe Péters “Cuvée de Réserve” Blanc de Blancs non-vintage Brut is from the base year of 2015, with reserve wines in the blend from his perpetual cuvée dating all the way back to 1988 included. The wine was disgorged in December of 2018 after two and a half years aging *sur latte*. Eighty-five percent of the *vins clairs* go through malo, with the wines raised in a combination of stainless steel tanks, casks and cement tanks prior to the second fermentation. The wine offers up a fine bouquet of pear, delicious apple, hazelnut, chalky soil tones and brioche. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and very nicely balanced, with a good core of fruit, fine soil signature, frothy *mousse* and good length and grip on the nascently complex and still a touch youthful finish. This is very good today, but still a bit youthfully green on the backend, but this is simply its stage (like many 2004s showed early on) and will mitigate nicely with bottle age. I do not mind drinking it all right now, but for those who might be a little less sanguine about its youthful guise, simply tuck it away in the cellar for a year or two and let it blossom properly. The constituent components here are quite good. 2019-2035+.

91.

J. L. Vergnon “Conversation” Blanc de Blancs Brut NV (Mesnil-sur-Oger)

The J. L. Vergnon “Conversation” Blanc de Blancs non-vintage Brut is from the base year of 2013 and includes one quarter reserve wines in the blend. It was disgorged in October of 2018, finished with a *dosage* of five grams per liter and the *vins clairs* did not undergo malo. The bouquet is deep and nascently complex, offering up scents of pear, apple, hazelnuts, chalky soil tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and crisp, with a good core, pinpoint bubbles and fine balance and grip on the long and fairly complex finish. This has a nice girdle of acidity to go with flavors that are starting to open up nicely into their secondary elements. 2019-2040. **91.**

Brut and Extra Brut NV

L. Aubry Brut NV (Jouy-lès-Reims)

The new release of Aubry’s non-vintage Brut is composed of a cépages of fifty-five percent pinot meunier, twenty-five percent chardonnay, twenty percent pinot noir and the final five percent a blend of petit meslier, arbanne and fromenteau. The wine is fifty percent from the base year of 2015 and fifty percent from the cuvée’s solera of reserve wines dating back to 1998. It was disgorged in January of 2019 after nearly three years aging *sur latte*. The wine is quite lovely on the nose, offering up a complex blend of apple, white peach, gentle smokiness, patissière, a good base of soil and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and youthfully complex, with a good core, fine mineral drive, pinpoint bubbles and very good cut and grip on the snappy finish. This is very young still, but also very good, and as I have had very good results aging this bottling for a few years, I suspect this will be really tasty if given two or three years in the cellar to allow it to really blossom. Good juice. 2021-2040+. **89+.**

H. Billiot Fils “Brut Réserve” Grand Cru NV (Ambonnay)

Laetitia Billiot makes very good wine and the new release of her Brut Réserve is lovely. It is composed of its customary blend of seventy-five percent pinot noir and twenty-five percent chardonnay and was disgorged in October of 2018, so this is from the base year of 2015, with half of the cuvée comprised of equal parts reserve wines from the previous two vintages. The *vins clairs* do not go through malo, so the wine has a lovely girdle of acidity to present the classic mineral drive of Ambonnay. The bouquet delivers a fine blend of apple, white peach, a touch of patissière, excellent minerality and a discreetly smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is bright,

full-bodied and focused, with quite respectable depth at the core, refined mousse and very good length and grip on the complex finish. I do not know the dosage numbers here, but would guess it is between ten and twelve grams per liter, and to my palate, it is just a bit overly-dosé and I would have liked it with a touch drier backend. If your palate leans towards enjoying a bit more dosage in your Brut Champagne, add three points to my score, as the underlying wine here is really strong, but this just seems a bit too sweet to me on the backend. 2019-2035. **88.**



A side view of the stunningly beautiful Gothic cathedral in Reims.

Chartogne-Taillet “Ste. Anne” Brut NV (Merfy)

The new release of Chartogne-Taillet “Cuvée Ste. Anne” non-vintage Brut is primarily from the base year of 2016, but forty percent of the blend hails from the previous two vintages of reserve wines. Alexandre Chartogne has extended the aging of his *vins clairs* for eight to ten months prior to bottling (in a combination of casks and stainless steel tanks), so that the wine did not get blended for its secondary fermentation until July of 2017. The *cépages* is fifty percent pinot noir, forty percent chardonnay and ten percent pinot meunier and the wine was finished with a *dosage* of 4.5 grams after its disgorgement in December of 2018. The wine offers up a lovely bouquet of apple, white peach, fresh-baked bread, a good base of soil and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and focused nicely, with good, but not great depth at the core, elegant *mousse*, bright acids and perfectly respectable length and grip on the complex finish. This is a very tasty bottle from one of the best young winegrowers in

Champagne, but I have to concur with a few savvy Champagne merchants I have chatted with about this cuvée in the last year or so, that the wine is showing the strain from more of its former vineyard sources being used for single vineyard bottlings by Alexandre. This is still good juice, but at least this current version is not quite up to releases a few years back. 2019-2035. **89.**

Egly-Ouriet “Grand Cru” Brut NV (Ambonnay)

The current release of Egly-Ouriet “Grand Cru” non-vintage Brut is composed of fruit from the villages of Ambonnay (ninety percent), Bouzy and Verzenay. It was aged for fifty-two months *sur latte* and disgorged in November of 2018, so this is from the base year of 2013. The *cépages* is seventy percent pinot noir and thirty percent chardonnay, with the *vins clairs* barrel-fermented and aged in older casks, without undergoing malolactic fermentation. The wine offers up a fine and nicely maturing bouquet of peach, apple, hazelnut, warm biscuits, a good base of soil and a touch of buttery oak. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and shows of plenty of mid-palate depth, with good soil signature, pinpoint bubbles and very good length and grip on the complex finish. This was finished with a *dosage* of three grams per liter. Good juice. **91.**

Egly-Ouriet “Vieillessement Prolongé” Extra Brut NV (Ambonnay)

The new release of Egly-Ouriet “Vieillessement Prolongé” non-vintage Extra Brut is a one-third each blend of the 2011, 2010 and 2009 base years. The *cépages* is sixty percent pinot noir and forty percent chardonnay and the wine was aged *sur latte* for eighty-four months prior to disgorgement and was finished with a *dosage* of two grams per liter. The wine delivers fine aromatics in its constellation of pear, apple, nutskin, fresh-baked bread, gentle spice tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is broad-shouldered, full-bodied and complex, with a great core of fruit, brisk acids, pinpoint bubbles and excellent length and grip on the still snappy finish. The *vins clairs* for this do not undergo malo and this wine still has a lovely girdle of youthful acidity to carry it far into the future. Good juice. 2019-2050+. **92.**

Pierre Gerbais “Grains de Celles” Extra Brut Rosé NV (Celles-sur-Ource)

Pierre Gerbais’ non-vintage Extra Brut “Grains de Celles” is composed from a *cépages* of fifty percent pinot noir and twenty-five percent each of chardonnay and pinot blanc. It was aged two and a half years *sur latte* and finished with a *dosage* of three grams per liter, hailing from the base year of 2014. The bouquet delivers a fine combination of apple, peach, limestone minerality, sourdough bread, dried flowers and a nice touch of smokiness. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and shows good depth at the core, with pinpoint bubbles, good balance and grip and a long, vibrant finish. This has the cut and grip of a good non-malo wine that is starting to really blossom. A very good example. 2019-2040+. **90.**

Pierre Gerbais “l’Originale” Extra Brut NV (Celles-sur-Ource)

This bottling of Pierre Gerbais “l’Originale” non-vintage Extra Brut is composed entirely of pinot blanc and hails from the base year of 2013. It was aged fully three years *sur latte* prior to disgorgement and was finished with a *dosage* of three grams per liter. The wine offers up a bright and expressive nose of white peach, delicious apple, raw almond, chalky soil tones and just a hint of pastry cream in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and complex, with an excellent core, frothy *mousse*, fine focus and grip, lovely mineral drive and a long, well-balanced finish. The backend has a gentle twist to it from the *cépages* of pinot blanc, that is not customary, but just different. I particularly like this bottling at the table over the course of a meal! 2019-2035. **91.**

Pierre Gerbais “Cuvée de Réserve” Brut NV (Celles-sur-Ource)

The current release of Pierre Gerbais “Cuvée de Réserve” non-vintage Brut is from the base year of 2014 and spent two years aging *sur latte*. The *cépages* is fifty percent pinot noir and

twenty-five percent chardonnay and pinot blanc and the wine was finished with a *dosage* of seven grams per liter. The wine offers up a complex bouquet of apple, peach, chalky minerality, warm bread and a lovely, gently musky floral topnote. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and nicely balanced, with a good core, elegant *mousse*, fine mineral drive and a long, complex finish. I like this bottling quite well, but seven grams per liter of *dosage* is fairly generous for the wine and some may find the *dosage* sticks out just a touch on the backend. 2019-2040+. **90.**

Henri Goutorbe “Cuvée Prestige” Brut NV (Aÿ)

The Henri Goutorbe “Cuvée Prestige” non-vintage Brut currently in the market is composed of a blend of seventy percent pinot noir, twenty-five percent chardonnay and five percent pinot meunier. It was disgorged in January of 2018 and includes twenty-five percent reserve wines in its composition. The wine offers up a good nose of white peach, apple, warm bread, a good base of soil and a touch of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and shows off good mid-palate depth, with sound acids and pretty good length on the well-balanced finish. The bubbles here are a bit coarse, which keeps my score down a bit, and the finish is not as long as several other comparable non-vintage Bruts I tasted for this report. But, that said, this is still quite tasty. 2019-2030. **88.**

Marc Herbart “Cuvée de Réserve” Brut NV (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ)

Jean-Paul Herbart’s “Cuvée de Réserve” in the market this year is composed of its typical blend of eighty-five percent pinot noir and fifteen percent chardonnay. It is from the base year of 2015, but this is just under half of the cuvée, with twenty-five percent of the blend from 2014, twenty percent from 2013 and ten percent from 2012! It was disgorged in December of 2017 and offers up a complex bouquet of apple, white peach, brioche, a good base of soil and a topnote of white flowers. On the palate the wine is crisp, full and complex, with a good core of fruit, nice mineral undertow, pinpoint bubbles and a long, bouncy and nicely balanced finish. The *dosage* here is a touch on the generous side, but with good acids and mineral drive, it does not cause any diminution of precision on the backend. Good juice, though some Champagne drinkers may find it a bit too *dosé*. 2019-2035. **90.**

Huré Frères “Cuvée Invitation” Brut NV (Ludes)

The “Cuvée Invitation” from Huré Frères is composed of a blend of forty percent each of pinot noir and pinot meunier, augmented by twenty percent chardonnay. The current release is from the base year of 2014, includes about a third of reserve wines, spent three years aging *sur latte* and was finished with a *dosage* of six grams per liter. The wine delivers fine aromatic complexity in its vibrant blend of apple, white peach, spring flowers, lovely soil tones and a nice touch of orange zest in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and nicely built for aging, with a lovely girdle of acidity, fine focus and grip, frothy *mousse* and a long, nascently complex and classy finish. I really like this wine, which I think will be an even better drink with a few years’ worth of bottle age. 2019-2040. **90+.**

Huré Frères “Cuvée Mémoire” Extra Brut NV (Ludes)

The Huré Frères “Cuvée Mémoire” non-vintage Extra Brut is produced from the family’s solera, which they began in 1982, with the youngest wine in this particular blend hailing from the 2013 vintage. The *cépages* forty-five percent each of pinot noir and pinot meunier, with ten percent chardonnay. The wine spent two years aging *sur latte*, but the back label does not have a date of disgorgement, but I was probably during the summer of 2016. It was finished off with a *dosage* of only two grams per liter. The wine offers up a fine nose that shows its predominance of red grapes, wafting from the glass in a mix of peach, apple, *patissière*, fresh-baked bread, a

good base of soil and a touch of meunier floral tones in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and focused, with a good core, pinpoint bubbles and fine soil signature defining the long, complex and very nicely balanced finish. This is a lovely bottle that is starting to drink quite nicely, but it will be even better with another couple of years in the cellar. 2019-2040+. **91.**

Jacquesson “Cuvée No. 742” Extra Brut NV (Dizy)

I wrote about the most recent release of Jacquesson’s “Cuvée No. 742” back in the summer, so I was very happy to have the opportunity to see how it is starting to blossom a half dozen months down the road. The wine is from the base year of 2014, with the *vins clairs* fermented and raised in large, older oak *foudres* prior to bottling for its secondary fermentation. The *dosage* is of 1.5 grams and the wine was disgorged in July of 2018. The nose remains young and beautifully precise, delivering scents of apple, pear, lovely floral tones, chalky minerality, elegant nuttiness and a bit of buttery oak from its *elevage* in *foudres*. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and zesty, with superb mid-palate density, lovely mineral drive, refined *mousse* and an excellent girdle of acidity to carry it far into the future. This wine has fine depth and backend length, but it is still a puppy and needs at least a few more years in the cellar to start to blossom. It will age beautifully! 2022-2055+. **92.**

Lombard et Cie Verzenay “Lieu à Dit Les Corettes” Brut Nature NV

Lombard et Cie’s “Lieu à Dit Les Corettes” Brut Nature from Verzenay is composed entirely of pinot noir and was disgorged in November of 2018. The *vins clairs* do not undergo malolactic fermentation and seventy-five percent are aged in oak barrels for six months. The wine has great depth on both the nose and palate, with the bouquet wafting from the glass in a blend of white peach, a touch of apple, complex minerality, fresh-baked bread, dried flowers and plenty of smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and beautifully balanced for a Brut Nature, with a well-integrated structural chassis of acidity, excellent focus and grip and a long, complex and classy finish. This is very good juice! 2019-2040+. **92.**

Moussé Fils “l’Or d’Eugène” Perpetuelle Blanc de Noirs Brut NV (Cuisles)

The Moussé Fils “l’Or d’Eugène” Perpetuelle Blanc de Noirs non-vintage Brut is composed as a fifty-fifty blend of the base year (in this case 2015) and the solera that the domaine set up in 2003 for this bottling. The *cépages* is eighty percent pinot meunier and twenty percent pinot noir, with the wine having been disgorged in December of 2018 and finished with a *dosage* of five grams per liter. The wine delivers a lovely and quite refined aromatic constellation of white peach, apple, *patissière*, chalky soil tones and a lovely topnote of gently musky, pinot meunier-derived floral tones. On the palate the wine is elegant, full-bodied, focused and very long, with fine *mousse*, excellent backend mineral drive, bright acids and excellent focus and grip on the complex finish. There is just a touch of youthful greenness on the finish here today that could be waited out with a bit of bottle age, but it did not dissuade me from enjoying the wine right out of the blocks. If this dollop of adolescence will deter you, just tuck this lovely wine away in the cellar for two years and then have at it! 2019-2040+. **91.**

Mouzon-Leroux “l’Atavique” Extra Brut NV (Verzy)

The new version of Sébastien Mouzon’s “l’Atavique” non-vintage Extra Brut is from the base year of 2014, with twenty-five percent of the cuvée composed of reserve wines from the previous two years. The *cépages* is its customary seventy percent pinot noir and thirty percent chardonnay, with a quarter of the *vins clairs* this year raised in casks, rather than tank. The wine was finished off with a *dosage* of two grams per liter after its disgorgement in March of 2018.

The bouquet is excellent, offering up a youthfully complex nose of white peach, apple, bread dough, plenty of upper register smokiness, a hint of fresh nutmeg and that classic, Verzy steely minerality. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and seamlessly balanced, with a superb core of fruit, elegant *mousse* and excellent length and grip on the nascently complex and very promising finish. Like all of Sébastien Mouzon's bottlings, this is made to age long and gracefully, so even though it is very tasty out of the blocks, it will be even better with three to five years in the cellar. 2019-2050. **92.**

Bruno Paillard "Première Cuvée" Extra Brut NV (Reims)

The new release of Bruno Paillard "Première Cuvée" non-vintage Extra Brut is from the base year of 2014 and was disgorged in December of 2018. The wine offers up beautiful depth and precision on the nose, wafting from the glass in a regal blend of apple, fresh apricot, warm bread, a superb base of soil tones, lemon zest, spring flowers and a hint of upper register smokiness that will become more pronounced with bottle age. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and impeccably balanced, with a lovely core, elegant *mousse* and a long, complex and zesty finish. This is first class bubbly. 2019-2050+. **93.**

Pehu-Simonet "Face Nord" Extra Brut NV (Verzenay)

The new release of the Pehu-Simonet "Face Nord" non-vintage Extra Brut is from the base year of 2013 and spent four years aging *sur latte* prior to its disgorgement in March of 2018. The wine is composed of a *cépages* of two-thirds pinot noir and one-third chardonnay, with the *vins clairs* going through full malolactic fermentation, which is an exception for David Pehu's wines. The wine is produced entirely from his vineyards in the grand cru village of Verzenay and offers up its bouquet of apple, white peach, fresh-baked bread, a touch of smokiness and a lovely foundation of minerality. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and nicely soil-driven, with a good core of fruit, frothy *mousse* and very good length and grip on the dry, focused and complex finish. I do not have the *dosage* details here, but I would guess this is between four and five grams per liter. Good juice that should age very well indeed. 2019-2045. **90.**

Jean-Marc Sélèque "Solessence" Extra Brut NV (Pierry)

This version of Jean-Marc Sélèque's Solessence is from the base year of 2016 and was disgorged in October of 2018. The wine is its customary blend of fifty percent chardonnay, forty percent pinot meunier and ten percent pinot noir and was finished with a *dosage* of three grams per liter this year. The bouquet is deep and youthful, offering up scents of apple, pear, smoky overtones, a complex base of soil, warm bread and a discreet topnote of nutskin. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and snappy, with a fine core and excellent soil signature, elegant *mousse* and lovely length and grip on the very well-balanced finish. To my palate, this is still too young for primetime drinking and I would cellar it for a couple of years at least, just to let it come out from behind its fine girdle of acidity and start to really drink with generosity. It is a first class non-vintage bottling! 2021-2045. **91+.**

Vilmart & Cie "Grand Cellier" Brut NV (Rilly la Montagne)

The new release of Vilmart & Cie "Grand Cellier" is from the base year of 2014, with reserve wines added from the previous two vintages. It is made up of a blend of seventy percent chardonnay and thirty percent pinot noir and was disgorged in October of 2017. As the *vins clairs* for this bottling spend ten months aging in used oak casks prior to blending for secondary fermentation, the wine spent just over two years aging *sur latte* prior to disgorgement. The wine is drinking very well today, offering up a complex and wide open bouquet of pear, apple, lovely minerality, brioche and a topnote of hazelnut. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and

frothy, with a good core, lovely mineral drive, fine focus and grip and a long, youthfully complex finish. This is tasty today, but will be even better with a bit more bottle age. 2019-2040+. **91.**

Non-Vintage Brut and Extra Brut Rosé

Pierre Gerbais “Grains de Celles” Extra Brut Rosé NV (Celles-sur-Ource)

The current release of Pierre Gerbais “Grains-de-Celles” non-vintage Extra Brut Rosé is from the base year of 2014. It is comprised of a *cépages* of fifty percent pinot noir and twenty-five percent each of chardonnay and pinot blanc. It was aged two and a half years *sur latte* and finished with a *dosage* of three grams per liter. The wine is a lovely salmon color and offers up a very expressive nose of blood orange, rhubarb, rye bread, lovely minerality and a topnote of dried roses. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a good core of fruit, a nice touch of vinosity, pinpoint bubbles and very good length and grip on the well-balanced finish. This is a lovely Extra Brut Rosé that really is built for the table. 2019-2040. **90.**

Nicolas Maillart Brut Rosé NV (Écueil)

The Nicolas Maillart non-vintage Brut Rosé is composed of a fifty-fifty blend of chardonnay and pinot noir, with eight percent of the pinot being still red wine. It is from the base year of 2014 and was finished with a *dosage* of seven grams per liter, after its disgorgement in November of 2017. The bouquet is bright and zesty, wafting from the glass in a mix of cherries, tangerine, chalky soil tones, dried rose petals, sourdough bread and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still briskly youthful, with a good core of fruit, fine backend mineral drive, elegant *mousse* and a long, still fairly primary finish. This could do with a couple of years in the cellar to more fully unwind structurally. It is quite tasty. 2021-2040+. **90+.**

Bruno Paillard “Rosé Première Cuvée” Extra Brut NV (Reims)

The new release of Bruno Paillard “Rosé Première Cuvée” non-vintage Extra Brut is from the base year of 2014 and was disgorged in July of 2018, after having spent three years aging *sur latte* and a handful of months in the cellar, post-disgorgement, to recover its balance. The wine is its customary very pale salmon color and delivers beautiful aromatic complexity in its bouquet of white cherry, nectarine, chalky soil tones, bread dough, a gentle touch of spice and a topnote of dried rose petals. On the palate the wine is pure, refined and full-bodied, with a superb core, lovely soil signature, bright acids, impeccable *mousse* and outstanding length and grip on the complex and perfectly balanced finish.

Vintage-Dated Blanc de Blancs

2014 Pierre Gimmonet et Fils “Cuvée Gastronom” Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime (Cuis)

The 2014 Pierre Gimmonet et Fils “Cuvée Gastronom” Blanc de Blancs is composed of a nice blend of premier and grand cru vineyard sources and was aged three years on its fine lees prior to its disgorgement in July of 2018. It was finished with a *dosage* of five grams per liter. The wine offers up a lovely bouquet of pear, apple, *crème patissière*, chalky soil tones, warm bread and a topnote of spring flowers. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and very nicely balanced, with frothy *mousse*, good focus and grip and a long, open and tasty finish. This has good, but not great depth at the core, but that is my only minor complaint with what is otherwise a very stylish bottle. 2019-2040. **90.**

2012 Delamotte Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime (Mesnil-sur-Oger)

The 2012 Delamotte Blanc de Blancs is a truly beautiful example of this high quality vintage. The refined and very complex nose wafts from the glass in a classy blend of pear, apple, almond, brioche, chalky minerality and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and still quite youthfully structured, with a fine girdle of acidity, elegant *mousse*, excellent length and grip and a very promising, snappy finish. This is certainly drinkable today, but it is a puppy and really needs three to five years in the cellar to fully blossom and start to drink with generosity. It is going to age very nicely and will be a first rate example of Blanc de Blancs for at least two or three decades. 2019-2050. **92.**



Spring coming to vineyards in the Côte des Blancs.

2010 J. L. Vergnon “Expression” Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut Millésime (Mesnil-sur-Oger)

The 2010 J. L. Vergnon “Expression” Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut Millésime was disgorged in June of 2016 after more than five years aging sur latte. This bottling is composed of fruit sourced eighty percent from Mesnil and ten percent each from Avize and Oger. The vins clairs are fermented in stainless steel and the malolactic fermentation is blocked. The dosage of this bottling is three grams per liter and the wine was disgorged in June 2017. The bouquet is deep and blossoming nicely, offering up a mix of pear, apple, almond, chalky soil tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and still nicely racy, with a good core, fine focus and grip, elegant *mousse* and fine length and grip on the well-balanced finish.

This is a fine bottle that is already drinking quite well, but will be even better with a few more years in the cellar. 2019-2045+. **92.**

2007 Salon “le Mesnil” Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime (Mesnil-sur-Oger)

I really love the 2007 vintage of Salon, which seems a tad more accessible out of the blocks than some recent vintages of Salon. The non-malo style of Salon usually makes this wine rather bound up behind its significant structural elements and in need of additional bottle age, even after the wine has spent a decade aging *sur latte* prior to disgorgement and release. However, the 2007 Salon was nicely giving out of the blocks, with perhaps not a completely unimpeded view to the magic that will be available at full maturity, but a clear line of sight to what lies ahead and already quite a bit of pleasure in the glass. The bouquet is deep, bright and complex, offering up scents of lemon, apple, complex limestone minerality, fresh-baked bread and a lovely topnote of citrus zest. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, long and nicely accessible, with a rock solid core, lovely limestone mineral drive, elegant *mousse* and outstanding length and grip on the complex and beautifully balanced finish. The 2007 Salon seems likely to age long and gracefully, as is this marvelous *Tête de Cuvée*’s calling card, but will not demand ten more years in the cellar prior to starting to drink with generosity. A beautiful bottle. 2018-2055. **96.**

Vintage-Dated Brut and Extra Brut

2014 Jean-Marc Sélèque “Soliste” Meunier Extra Brut Millésime (Pierry)

The 2014 Jean-Marc Sélèque “Soliste” Extra Brut Millésime is composed entirely of pinot meunier and was finished with a *dosage* of two grams per liter, after its disgorgement in February of 2018. The wine hails from the *lieu à dit* of la Goutte d’Or in Pierry, which was planted in 1951. The wine is aged on its fine lees under cork, rather than under crown cap. The wine offers up a superb young nose, redolent of white peach, apple, a beautiful base of soil, just a touch of almond, warm bread, smoky overtones and a whisper of meunier flowers in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and beautifully transparent, with a rock solid core of fruit, frothy *mousse*, excellent focus and grip and a long, zesty and still fairly youthful finish. This is certainly quite drinkable today, but it is a young wine and I would opt for tucking it in the cellar for at least a few years and let it blossom a bit more from behind its lovely structural chassis. 2021-2050. **92+.**

2014 La Perthe “4 V” Blanc de Noirs Extra Brut- Pierre et François Huré (Ludes)

The 2014 La Perthe “4 Éléments” Blanc de Noirs Extra Brut vintage from Pierre et François Huré is composed entirely from pinot noir and spent three and a half years aging *sur latte* prior to its disgorgement and finishing *dosage* of three grams per liter. The grapes for this wine hail entirely from the vineyard of La Perthe in Ludes and the *vins clairs* are barrel-fermented and raised in *demi-muids*. They do not undergo malolactic fermentation. The wine delivers a lovely and quite refined bouquet of apple, peach, *patissière*, chalky soil tones, dried flowers and a wisp of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and nascently complex, with a fine core of fruit, elegant *mousse*, still fairly brisk acids and fine length and grip on the well-balanced finish. This is an excellent bottle, but with its non-malo style, it could still do with a few years in the cellar to let the acids back away just a bit more. It will age long and gracefully and is most impressive. 2021-2050+. **92.**

2014 Vilmart & Cie “Grand Cellier d’Or” Brut Millésime (Rilly la Montagne)

The 2014 Vilmart & Cie “Grand Cellier d’Or” is composed of its traditional *cépages* of eighty percent pinot noir and twenty percent chardonnay. The *vins clairs* are barrel-fermented and do not undergo malo for this bottling, which was aged nearly three years *sur latte* prior to its disgorgement in June of 2018 (as Laurent Champs ages all of his *vins clairs* for ten months in barrel prior to blending and secondary fermentation). The wine offers up a lovely, youthful bouquet of white peach, apple, fresh-baked bread, a fine base of soil and just a whisper of buttery oak in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, crisp and full-bodied, with lovely depth at the core, zesty acids, pinpoint bubbles and fine focus and grip on the long and complex finish. This is very tasty already, but it is still a puppy and another few years in the cellar will allow its oak component to submerge fully in the wine and the other components to really come to the fore. Good juice. 2022-2045+. **91+**.

2013 H. Billiot Fils “Grand Cru” Brut Millésime (Ambonnay)

Laetitia Billiot’s 2013 Brut Millésime is made from a *cépages* of seventy percent pinot noir and thirty percent chardonnay, with the *vins clairs* not undergoing malolactic fermentation. The wine was disgorged in December of 2018, after a bit more than four and a half years aging *sur latte*. The wine offers up a fine bouquet of apple, peach, fresh-baked bread, a fine base of Ambonnay minerality and a bit of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still plenty brisk from its lack of malo, with a very good core of fruit, fine soil signature, pinpoint bubbles and a long, complex and zippy finish. This is a fine example of the vintage, and for those who really like some cut in their bubbly, it is already drinking very well indeed. If you prefer your Champagne a touch less tensile in personality, just tuck this fine bottle age away in the cellar for three or four years and let it relax a bit structurally. A very well-made bottle. 2019-2045+. **92**.

2013 Moussé Fils “Terre d’Illite” Blanc de Noirs Extra Brut Millésime (Cuisles)

The 2013 Moussé Fils “Terre d’Illite” Blanc de Noirs is composed of a blend of ninety-five percent pinot meunier and five percent pinot noir. It was disgorged in July of 2018 after four-plus years aging *sur latte* and finished with a *dosage* of five grams per liter. The bouquet is excellent here, wafting from the glass in a mix of peach, apple, delicate meunier floral tones, a deep base of soil and bread dough. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and still quite youthful, with a good core, elegant *mousse* and fine length and grip on the nascently complex finish. This is a fine bottle in the making and it is certainly approachable today, but will be even better four or five years down the road. 2019-2045+. **91**.

2013 Mouzon-Leroux “la Blanche Voie” Extra Brut Millésime (Verzy)

The 2013 Mouzon-Leroux “la Blanche Voie” is Sébastien Mouzon’s first vintage of Spécial Club, and also his last. Sébastien decided that the required fancy boxes for each bottle of Spécial Club were bad for the environment and lobbied not to have to use them. When he was told that they were mandatory, he dropped out of the group. Consequently, this is not really a Spécial Club bottling, though it is in the elaborate bottle of the group. It is produced from a single *lieu à dit* in Verzy and is composed of a fifty-fifty blend of pinot noir and chardonnay. Seventy percent of the *vins clairs* were raised in casks and the wine was disgorged in July of 2018, after four years aging *sur latte*. It is non-*dosé*. The wine offers up a beautiful bouquet of apple, white peach, complex minerality, brioche, gentle smokiness and a topnote of white flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and beautifully-balanced, with a lovely

core of fruit, elegant *mousse* and fine focus and grip on the complex and very classy finish. This could have been a very auspicious first Spécial Club from Monsieur Mouzon! 2019-2050+. **92+**.



2012 Champagne Geoffroy “Empreinte” Brut Millésime (Cumières)

Jean-Baptiste Geoffroy’s 2012 Empreinte bottling is constructed of a blend of thirty-six percent pinot meunier, thirty-four percent pinot noir and thirty percent chardonnay. The *vins clairs* are almost exclusively raised in oak, in a variety of different sized casks and then aged for five-plus years *sur latte* prior to disgorgement in July of 2018. The wine delivers a fine aromatic constellation of apple, peach, warm bread, a good base of soil, a touch of meunier floral tones and a very discreet base of buttery oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and focused, with a fine core of fruit, good soil signature, very slightly coarse bubbles and very fine length and grip on the complex finish. This is an excellent wine, but I would love to see just a bit more refinement to the *mousse*; otherwise, this is exemplary juice. But, I have to keep the score down a point or two for the texture of the bubbles, and if this is not an issue for your palate, than please adjust the score accordingly. 2019-2050. **90**.

2012 Pehu-Simonet “Fins Lieux No. 1” Blanc de Noirs Extra Brut Millésime

The 2012 Pehu-Simonet “Fins Lieux No. 1” is composed entirely of Verzenay pinot noir from the vineyard of les Perthois, with a percentage of the *vins clairs* raised in cask. The wine was disgorged in January of 2019 and finished with a *dosage* of 1.5 grams. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a mix white peach, apple, *patissière*, a lovely base of Verzenay’s almost steely

soil tones and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and very nicely balanced, with good mineral drive, elegant *mousse* and fine length and grip on the still fairly snappy finish. This is a very good example of this fine vintage and will be even better with a bit of time tucked away in the cellar. 2019-2040+. **91+**.

2010 Huré Frères “Instantanée” Extra Brut Millésime (Ludes)

The 2010 Huré Frères “Instantanée” Extra Brut Millésime is composed of a blend of thirty-five percent each of chardonnay and pinot noir, coupled with thirty percent pinot meunier. It was aged seven years *sur latte* and finished with a *dosage* of approximately three grams per liter. The wine delivers lovely aromatics on the nose, featuring apple, fresh-baked bread, chalky soil tones, gentle smokiness and a lovely topnote of hazelnut. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and nicely open in personality, with a good core, fine *mousse* and very good length and grip on the well-balanced and complex finish. This is a lovely example of the vintage. 2019-2040+. **92**.

2009 Bruno Paillard “Assemblage” Extra Brut Millésime (Reims)

The 2009 Bruno Paillard “Assemblage” Extra Brut Millésime is not quite in the market yet, so I have not yet seen which artist was commissioned to do a painting to adorn the label of this lovely wine. The artist will have quite a gorgeous bottle to match to his or her painting, as the 2009 Assemblage is a stellar bottle that is just starting to stretch its wings and shows beautiful potential for the coming three or four decades! The bouquet is deep, precise and very classy, wafting from the glass in a blend of white peach, tangerine, chalky soil tones, brioche, spring flowers and a hint of lavender in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and nicely plump at the core, with the solar personality of the vintage beautifully harnessed behind a superb girdle of acidity. The *mousse* here is exemplary, the wine has excellent balance and grip and is long, refined and still youthful on the stellar finish. The wine will be approachable when first released, but is really built for a long life in the bottle and I would leave bottles alone in a quiet and cool corner of the cellar for another five to ten years and really let the magic unfold completely! It was disgorged in September of 2017 and is just now readying to depart the cellars in Reims and delight Champagne lovers the world over. 2024-2055+. **93**.

2008 Gaston Chiquet “Or Premier Cru” Brut Millésime (Dizy)

The 2008 Gaston Chiquet “Or Premier Cru” Brut Millésime is composed of a blend of sixty percent pinot noir and forty percent chardonnay and was disgorged in July of 2018, after a bit over nine years aging *sur latte*. The bouquet is excellent here, offering up scents of apple, peach, brioche, a fine base of soil and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and nicely complex, with good, but not great depth at the core, pinpoint bubbles and lovely balance on the fairly long finish. This is a very tasty wine, but it does not quite have the mid-palate core or backend length to be in the very top division. That said, this is drinking very nicely right now and still provides plenty of pleasure for the relatively near-term. 2019-2030. **90**.

2006 Henri Goutorbe “Spécial Club” Brut Millésime (Aÿ)

The 2006 Goutorbe “Spécial Club” Brut Millésime is composed of a blend of seventy percent pinot noir and thirty percent chardonnay. It was aged eleven years *sur latte* prior to disgorgement in May of 2018! The wine is really showing beautifully today, offering up a

complex and nicely layers bouquet of apple, white peach, fresh-baked bread, hazelnut, a superb base of soil and a nice touch of *patissière* in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and wide open in personality, with an excellent core, fine focus and grip, elegant *mousse* and superb length on the zesty finish. While this wine is now nicely into its plateau of peak maturity, it still has decades of life ahead of it. Fine, fine juice! 2019-2040+. **92.**

2004 Bruno Paillard “Nec Plus Ultra” Brut Millésime (Reims)

I have been looking forward to the release of the 2004 Bruno Paillard “Nec Plus Ultra” for several years now, and was very happy to hear that it is now ready for release. This is Bruno and Alice Paillard’s *Tête de Cuvée* and it is a stunning example of the 2004 vintage. The wine was not disgorged until September of 2017, after more than twelve years aging *sur latte* and then held for a couple more years in the cellars to let it really settle in from its disgorgement! The wine offers up superb aromatic precision in its constellation of white peach, apple, a very complex base of chalky minerality, fresh-baked bread, a dollop of fresh almond and incipient smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and full-bodied, with a lovely core of fruit, very refined *mousse*, laser-like focus and marvelous grip on the long, complex and zesty finish. This is a stellar vintage for the N.P.U. from the Paillard family, which is drinking nicely right out of the blocks, but which clearly is still in climbing mode and will be even better a decade down the road! 2019-2060. **95+.**



Benoît Tarlant in the domaine's tasting room in Oeuilly.

2003 Tarlant “le Vigne d’Or” Blanc de Meuniers Brut Nature (Oeuilly)

Benoît and Mélanie Tarlant are turning out truly beautiful Champagnes from their fine domaine in the village of Oeuilly. Their le Vigne d’Or is produced entirely from very old vine pinot meunier, planted in 1947. The Tarlants age this nearly ten years *sur latte* prior to disgorgement, so this was disgorged back in February of 2013 and happily, is still to be found here in the New York market. It is clearly one of the greatest examples of the vintage that I have tasted and is drinking at a superb plateau at the present time, offering up a mature and complex nose of nectarine, sourdough bread, a touch of walnut, a complex base of soil tones, dried flowers and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and superbly well-balanced, with a fine core of fruit, excellent soil signature, refined *mousse* and a long, crisp and very classy finish. Though this is non-*dosé*, the long period of time aging on its fine lees allowed the acids to be buffered seamlessly and the wine has drunk with grace since it was first released. It continues to cruise along at its apogee and has decades of life still ahead of it. 2019-2045+. **94.**

1996 Henriot Brut Millésime (Reims)

I had not opened a bottle of the 1996 Henriot Brut Millésime in seven years and was very happy to see that this most recent bottle was cruising along seamlessly. The color has started to deepen to a gently golden hue since I last drank the wine, but it remains fresh, vibrant and beautifully composed on both the nose and palate. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a mix of backed apples, nectarine, sourdough bread, walnuts, chalky soil tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and complex, with a fine core of fruit, elegant *mousse*, lovely, racy acids and a long, classy and vibrant finish. This wine is aging beautifully and shows none of the slightly screechy acids that can be found in a certain percentage of 1996s today. 2019-2045. **92+.**

Vintage Dated Brut and Extra Brut Rosé

2014 L. Aubry Sablé Rosé “Cuvée Nicolas Aubry” Brut Nature Millésime (Jouy-lès-Reims)

The 2014 Aubry “Sablé” Rosé Brut Nature Millésime is an exotic blend of thirty percent of Pinot Meunier and Pinot Noir (fermented together), ten percent Chardonnay, twenty percent Arbanne, twenty-five percent Petit Meslier, ten percent Pinot Blanc and five percent of still red wine, solely being Pinot Meunier. All of the *vins clairs* go through full malo. The wine was disgorged in October of 2018 and is a very pale copper color. The nose here is complex and quite unique, offering up scents of tart orange, bread dough, a good base of soil, spring flowers and fresh almond. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and nicely balanced for a non-*dosé*, with good depth at the core, fine focus and grip, frothy *mousse*, snappy acids and a long, bone-dry finish. This is quite good, but really built almost exclusively (at least at this young age) for specialists in Brut Nature. For my palate, I would have welcomed at least a couple of grams of *dosage*, but it is quite well done in its style and should age well. 2019-2040+. **90.**

2012 Henriot Brut Rosé Millésime (Reims)

The 2012 Henriot Brut Rosé is a simply stunning bottle of bubbly. The color is a fairly deep salmon rose and the bouquet is pure, ripe and beautifully detailed, wafting from the glass in a vibrant mix of raspberries, blood orange, chalky minerality, a touch of rye toast, beautiful, almost exotic spice tones of cardamom and clove, rose petals and a topnote of citrus zest. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and very precise, with an excellent core of fruit,

fine soil signature, refined *mousse* and a long, balanced and very complex finish. This is dynamite Rosé that is drinking very nicely at age seven, but has the potential to age long and very gracefully. 2019-2050. **93.**

RECENTLY-TASTED SPANISH AND PORTUGUESE WINES AUTUMN 2019



I write about Spanish and Portuguese wines twice a year and always look forward to these reports, as the younger generation of producers in these regions is doing marvelous work and hand-crafting some stellar wines of *terroir* and classical styling. When one couples all of the good new work being done by these younger producers with the continued success of the best old line *bodegas* of Spain and Portugal, one cannot imagine a more exciting time for wine in these two countries. Normally, this report would be even larger than it is, but as I have alerted subscribers to in recent months, my eighty-eight year-old father's health issues (and his attendant descent into the Rabbit's Hole of senior healthcare in the United States) has had me devoting full-time hours to his healthcare needs and reining in my the depth of my tasting just a bit in the last couple of months. Consequently, I did not reach out to quite as many importers and distributors of Spanish wines for this report as I hope to do in the next installment on wines from the Iberian peninsula, as I simply do not have enough hours in a day to devote to tasting samples right now as is customarily the case. However, that said, I have tried not to slack off to much and find that my current tasting schedule these last few months, where I get back from my father's hospital room around 7:00 PM each evening and then taste over dinner until around 10:00 PM has been more than sufficient to work through a goodly pile of samples, and happily, as many of

these wines are from some of the very best producers in their respective countries, it has served as a true palliative for the soul each evening, after tilting at windmills in the US healthcare system all day long.

The following report includes plenty of notes from some of these younger winegrowers making waves across the Iberian peninsula, as well as some of the two countries' most famous and long-running success stories. As I am planning a proper historical feature for a coming issue of the newsletter on the great, old school Rioja producer of Bodegas Riojanas in the near future, I have included only notes on their most recent releases in the market in this article and will keep my notes on some of their older, venerable vintages for that historical piece, despite having recently enjoyed a magical lineup all the way back to 1942! But, those notes will keep (just as well as the wines!) for a proper estate feature and only the newest releases from the bodega appear in this article. While I left a small mountain of samples from both Spain and Portugal untasted for this article, for the same reasons I have outlined elsewhere and which will be tasted and written up in the next issue of the newsletter, I did manage to somehow taste the lion's share of the Rioja samples that arrived over these two months, so that section of the article is properly deep and full of stunning bottles to recommend. Usually I will have a lot more from Galicia in one of these bi-annual reports on the Iberian peninsula, but I did not manage to taste as many of the beautiful wines from this picturesque region and am looking forward to covering them in proper depth in the following iteration of this report in one of the coming issues.

Rosado

2009 Viña Tondonia Rioja Rosado “Gran Reserva”- López de Heredia

The new release of 2009 Viña Tondonia Rioja Rosado “Gran Reserva” from López de Heredia is a tad deeper in color than other recent vintages, probably reflecting the very warm summer of 2009. The wine is a blend of sixty percent Garnacha, thirty percent Tempranillo and ten percent Viura. It offers up a wide open and beautifully complex bouquet of strawberries, orange peel, a touch of watermelon, gorgeous spice tones, salty soil tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and complex, with lovely depth at the core, sound framing acids, lovely balance and grip and a long, classy finish. The acids are a bit on the low side for this bottling, which makes me think that this may well be a Tondonia Rosado that is best in the first decade of its life in bottle, but the balance is very good and it may well last far longer than I imagine. Of course, in proper Haro fashion, I have some little lamb chops to go on the grill to accompany this wine, so its immediate future is only going to be an hour or two! 2019-2030+? **92.**

Albariño

2018 Albariño- Lagar de Cervera (Rías Baixas)

The 2018 Albariño from Lagar de Cervera offers up a bright bouquet of limepeel, salty minerality, dried flowers and a touch of pear. On the palate the wine is crisp, medium-bodied and nicely mineral, with solid framing acids, a good core and perfectly respectable length and grip on the vibrant finish. This is a tasty, everyday Albariño with some character. 2019-2024. **87.**

2018 Albariño “Tabla de Sumar”- Compañía de Viños Tricó (Rías Baixas)

The 2018 Tabla de Sumar bottling from Compañía de Viños Tricó is a good, solid bottle of Albariño, but it is a bit adolescent in personality and should blossom nicely with a bit more age. The bouquet offers up today scents of grapefruit, citrus peel, a touch of menthol and stony

minerality. On the palate the wine is crisp, fullish and nicely balanced, with a good core and really lovely, salty mineral drive on the long and bouncy finish. This is a lovely example. 2019-2025+. **89.**

2018 Albariño “Atalier”- Raúl Pérez (Meaño)

The 2018 Albariño “Atalier” from Raúl Pérez is produced from ancient vines whose age are no longer known, but are probably in excess of one hundred and fifty years of age! These old vines have produced a lovely and snappy 2018, which offers up a complex bouquet of lime, lemon, salty minerality, citrus peel, dried flowers and a hint of leesiness. On the palate the wine is crisp, medium-full and complex, with zesty acids and good length and grip on the focused finish. This wine has just a whisper of volatile acidity to it, which elevates the aromatics, but may put some tasters off. I do not mind it. 2019-2025. **89.**

2016 Albariño- Compañía de Viños Tricó (Rías Baixas)

The 2016 Albariño from José Antonio López’s Compañía de Viños Tricó is his flagship wine, though it does not have its own cuvée name. He ages this bottling on its fine lees for a year and a half in stainless steel tanks prior to bottling, so that the 2016 is the new release. The wine is outstanding on both the nose and palate, offering up the added depth and dimension of extended aging for Albariño, delivering a superb blend of tart orange, smoke, salty, stony minerality, gentle leesiness, dried flowers and a bit of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, vibrant and complex, with a very polished palate impression, good acids and lovely length and grip on the classy finish. This is first class Albariño! 2019-2030. **92+.**

Galicía Tinto

2007 Caiño “Goliardo”- Bodegas Forjas del Salnés (Rías Baixas)

This is a single vineyard bottling of old vine Caiño that is produced by Raúl Pérez. I have lost track of the winery and do not know if it continues to be imported into the US, but the 2006 and 2007 vintages were brought in by José Pastor and I bought a few bottles when they were in the market. I last tasted the 2007 Goliardo bottling in the summer of 2009, so I was very curious to see how a decade in my cellar has allowed the wine to blossom. The wine is aging beautifully, offering up that lovely juxtaposition of depth and personality not dissimilar to Cornas or St. Joseph, coupled with a delicate, medium-full and tangy palate impression, as the wine is only 12.5 percent octane. The bouquet is superb, offering up scents of dark berries, smoked meats, pepper, granitic soil tones, woodsmoke and espresso. On the palate the wine is fullish, complex and tangy, with lovely focus and grip, superb intensity of flavor without undue weight, melting tannins and outstanding length and balance on the complex finish. This wine is very light on its feet, but has loads of personality and really is drinking well right now, but I do not know if it is going to make another couple of decades, as it does not seem to have the same inherent structure as Ribeira Sacra. 2019-2035. **92.**

Ribeira Sacra

2017 Mencía “Castro Candaz”- Raúl Pérez y Rodrigo Méndez (Chantada)

The 2017 Mencía “Castro Candaz” from Raúl Pérez and Rodrigo Méndez is a new project from these two winemakers, with the fruit for this bottling hailing from the cooler sub-region of Chantada in Ribeira Sacra, where the soils are more granitic than slate-based. The wine is made entirely with whole clusters and aged in a combination of older 500 liter barrels and *foudres*. While it is labeled as Mencía, it also includes the classic field blend of the region, so

that there is Garnacha Tintorera, Trousseau, Caiño and Brancellao included in the *cépages* in somewhat uncertain percentages. The wine offers up a deep and youthfully complex bouquet of dark berries, pomegranate, pepper, woodsmoke, espresso and a good base of stony soil tones. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and nicely light on its feet, with good soil signature, moderate, well-integrated tannins and a long, primary and promising finish. This is quite drinkable out of the blocks, but it will show decidedly more complexity as it has a chance to blossom with a bit more time in the bottle. Good juice. 2019-2040. **89.**

2017 Mencía Castro Candaz “A Boca Do Demo”- Raúl Pérez/ Rodrigo Méndez (Chantada)

The 2017 A Boca Do Demo from Raúl Pérez and Rodrigo Méndez is produced from a vineyard planted in 1950. Like so many of the old vineyards in Ribeira Sacra, this is predominantly Mencía, but with a field blend of other typical red varieties in the region comprising a small percentage of the cuvée. The wine is entirely whole cluster, fermented and aged in old *foudres* and bottled without fining or filtration. The 2017 A Boca do Demo is still youthful and needs a bit of air to blossom, but eventually offers up scents of dark berries, tree bark, pepper, slate and a topnote of fresh herbs. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and still tightly-knit, with a good core of fruit, fine soil signature, a fair bit of ripe tannin and good length and grip on the nascently complex finish. This is going to be a very good wine, but it is pretty structured today and will need some bottle age to blossom. 2025-2055. **90+.**

2017 Mencía Castro Candaz “Finca el Curvado”- Raúl Pérez/ Rodrigo Méndez (Chantada)

The 2017 Mencía Castro Candaz Finca el Curvado is not quite as old viney as the A Boca Do Demo, as half of the vines here were planted in 1950 and the other half in 1972. The wine is treated the same in the cellar and the 2017 version shows fine promise on the nose, wafting from the glass in a mix of dark berries, pomegranate, tree bark, a good base of granitic minerality and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and impressively transparent in personality, with a good core, fine-grained tannins and very good length and grip on the refined and complex finish. This is a tad less powerful than the A Boca Do Demo bottling, but I like its precision and soil signature even better. This is fine juice. 2022-2055. **92.**

2016 Risco- Adega Algueira

The Risco bottling from Adega Algueira is the new name for their Merenzao varietal bottling. The wine is outstanding in the 2016 vintage, offering up scents of sweet dark berries, coffee bean, a bit of roasted game, a superb base of soil, a bit of tree bark, just a dollop of botanicals and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nascently complex, with lovely mineral drive, ripe, well-integrated tannins and fine length and grip on the really well-balanced finish. This is a very good bottle in the making, but it is a few years away from blossoming and needs some time alone in the cellar. 2024-2055+. **91.**

2014 Ribeira Sacra Tinto “Lalama”- Dominio do Bibei (Quiroga-Bibeí)

Dominio do Bibei is the winery where Laura Lorenzo was the winemaker for several vintages, before she started her own project. The proprietor of the estate is Javier Domínguez, who produces his Lalama bottling from a blend of mostly Mencía, but which also includes just a bit of Sousón, Brancellao, Garnacha Tintorera and Mouratón- presumably as part of the field blend in the vineyard. The vines here are planted on a combination of both clay and slate, and the wine is raised for fourteen months in old, neutral casks, and an additional six months in tank prior to bottling. The 2014 Lalama is an excellent wine, offering up a complex bouquet of dark berries, pomegranate, tree bark, graphite, a fine base of soil tones, a touch of coffee grounds and

a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and still fairly youthful, with a good core of fruit, fine soil signature, ripe, well-integrated tannins and a long, nascently complex and very well-balanced finish. As there is more clay in Quiroga-Bibei than other sectors of Ribeira Sacra, this wine is a little less transparent in personality than wines from Amalfi for example, but it has lovely constituent components and with a bit of cellaring, is going to be a fine drink. 2023-2055. **90.**

Bierzo Blanco

2017 “La Del Vivo” La Vizcaína- Bodegas y Viñedos Raúl Pérez (Bierzo)

Raúl Pérez’s “La Del Vivo” La Vizcaína from is composed of a blend of Godello and Doña Blanca, with both varietals hailing from very old vines. As I noted last year, the fermentation and *elevage* of this wine is quite unique, as Señor Pérez has eighty percent of the cuvée barrel fermented in older casks (in which they spend their twelve months of *elevage*) and the other twenty percent is fermented in clay amphora and ages there for a year, prior to the two parts being reunited prior to bottling. The 2017 vintage is not as ripe as the 2015 reviewed last summer, as the wine comes in at a cool 12.5 percent alcohol and delivers a fine bouquet of tart orange, pineapple, a lovely base of soil, orange peel, dried flowers and a bit of amphora dustiness. On the palate the wine is bright, zesty and full-bodied, with a fine core of fruit, good mineral drive, a lovely girdle of acidity and lovely focus and grip on the long and complex finish. This has excellent backend energy and should age very nicely, though it is already drinking with plenty of personality. 2019-2035. **91+.**

2016 Godello “Ultreia”- Bodegas y Viñedos Raúl Pérez (Bierzo)

The Ulteia bottling of Godello from Raúl Pérez is mostly from north-facing vineyards, to allow the retention of more acidity in this cuvée. The wine is barrel-fermented and aged in a combination of 2500 liter *foudres* and 300 liter casks. The 2016 version is really lovely on both the nose and palate, with the bouquet offering up scents of lemon, pear, a hint of green olive, salty soil tones and a delicate topnote of beeswax. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a fine core, good mineral undertow, bright acids and excellent grip on the long and classy finish. I love good Godello and this is a very, very good one! 2019-2025+. **92.**

Bierzo Tinto

2017 Ribeiro Tinto “Eira Dos Mouros”- Casal de Armán

The 2017 Eira Dos Mouros Tinto from Casal de Armán is a fine follow-up to the excellent 2016 version Readers may recall from last summer that the wine is composed a blend of Souson, Caino Longo and Brancellao and raised entirely in stainless steel tanks. The 2017 tips the scales at a cool 12.5 percent octane and offers up a beautiful bouquet of sappy black fruit, a hint of pomegranate, bonfire, coffee grounds, a fine base of soil, just a dollop of tree bark and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is medium-full, bright and intensely flavored, with fine transparency and grip, modest tannins and a long, tangy and complex finish. This wine has lovely balance and plenty of personality! While it is quite approachable today, it is still a young wine and if you choose to drink it now, give it half an hour in decanter first to let it blossom properly. 2019-2035. **91.**

2017 Mencía “Ultreia Saint Jacques”- Bodegas y Viñedos Raúl Pérez (Bierzo)

As I mentioned in my note on the 2016 last year, the Ultreia “Saint Jacques” is an old vine cuvée made from a field blend that is principally Mencía, mingled with a touch of Trousseau and Alicante Bouschet co-planted, with the vines having been planted between 1900 and 1940. The 2017 Saint Jacques is showing excellent promise on the both the nose and palate, with the bouquet delivering a fine blend of sweet dark berries, chicory, graphite, tree bark, dark soil tones, a bit of coffee bean and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and very nicely balanced, with a fine core, good soil signature, ripe tannins and a long, vibrant and nascently complex finish. This is approachable today, but still really a young wine that deserves some bottle age to properly blossom. It is going to be excellent when it is mature, so a little patience will be richly rewarded. 2022-2065. **93.**

2016 Mencía “Las Gundiñas”- La Vizcaína- César Márquez y Raúl Pérez (Bierzo)

Raúl Pérez and César Márquez have another very old vine bottling in their Las Gundiñas, as this vineyard was planted in 1910. The soils here have more limestone in the clay than is the case with the La Poulosa vineyard. The 2016 Las Gundiñas is again a nicely ripe wine, tipping the scales at the same 13.5 percent as the excellent 2015 version. The bouquet is deep, precise and excellent, offering up scents of sweet dark berries, pomegranate, cola, graphite, a touch of tree bark, roasted meats, a great base of soil and a bit of smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and beautifully balanced, with a rock solid core of fruit, ripe, chewy tannins, tangy acids and lovely length and grip on the nascently complex, energetic and very promising finish. This is another great wine in the making, as was the case with the 2015! 2024-2065. **94.**

2016 Mencía “La Poulosa”- La Vizcaína- César Márquez y Raúl Pérez (Bierzo)

As I mentioned last year, the La Poulosa vineyard is not as old as some of these farmed by César Márquez and Raúl Pérez, as it was “only” planted in 1940! The vineyard is planted to a field blend that is mostly Mencía, but also includes Trousseau, Garnacha Tintorera and a few white grapes as well. This vineyard has a fairly high percentage of clay in the soils and does not include much slate, which defines the vineyards further to the west in Bierzo in the direction of Ribeira Sacra. The 2016 La Poulosa is a fine follow-up to the impressive 2015 version, offering up a complex bouquet of black cherries, pomegranate, dark soil tones, graphite, a touch of cola, gentle savory elements up high and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and meaty, with an excellent core, fine soil signature, ripe, buried tannins and a long, tangy and complex finish. This is delicious in its youthful guise, but is built for the long haul and will be even better with some significant bottle age. I like this even a hair better than the outstanding 2015 version! Great juice. 2019-2065. **93+.**

2016 “Ultreia ” Tinto- Bodegas y Viñedos Raúl Pérez (Bierzo)

The 2016 “Ultreia ” Tinto from Raúl Pérez is made up mostly of Mencía, but with small amounts of Trousseau, Garnacha Tintorera, Palomino and Doña Blanca also co-planted in the vineyards here and included in the cuvée. The wine is primarily whole clusters and fermented in old oak vats, with a sixty day maceration and aging in neutral oak. The 2016 Ultreia is nicely ripe at 13.5 percent octane, but also pure and balanced, as the nose wafts from the glass in a mix of black cherries, pomegranate, woodsmoke, a fine base of soil, chicory and a touch of tree bark in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite powerful in style, with a great core of fruit, fine mineral drive, ripe, firm tannins and a long, primary and very promising

finish. This is a big boy and a bit dense out of the blocks and will need some time in the cellar to start to stir, but it will be excellent in the fullness of time. 2024-2065. **91+**.

Valdeorras

2017 Godello “200 Cestos”- Adega A. Cocoa

The 2017 Godello “200 Cestos” from Adega Cocoa hails from a parcel of old vines, planted in 1940, on the slate soils of Valdeorras. The wine is barrel-fermented with indigenous yeasts in a selection of larger formats of older oak. The 2017 offers up a ripe bouquet of pear, pineapple, salty soil tones, lime peel and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, bright and full-bodied, with a good core, lovely acids and fine length and grip on the complex finish. This is pretty ripe, listed at 13.5 percent, so I do not think it will make old bones, but it has plenty of personality for the near-term. 2019-2023+? **89**.

Utiel-Requena

2017 Bobal “Temperamento”- Sierre Norte

This wine has been a very good value for several vintages running. These are old Bobal vines, more than sixty years of age now, and planted at higher elevation to give the wine vibrancy and more soil signature than one might expect. What I like best about the Bobal grape variety is that it often gives some of the complexity of a far more mature wine at a younger age. The 2017 Temperamento offers up really fine aromatics in its bouquet of dark berries, coffee grounds, bonfire, brown spices, a bit of roasted meats and a very good base of soil tones that seem likely to get autumnal with a bit of bottle age. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, ripe and complex, with a good core of fruit, moderate tannins and a bit of *sur maturité* and backend heat poking out on the long finish. This comes in listed at fourteen percent octane this year, but tastes a bit riper than that to my palate. It is a good wine, but not quite as precise as the 2015 version, which was the last vintage I tasted of this bottling. 2019-2030+. **87**.

Navarra

2015 Paal Syrah- Bodegas Caudalia

The 2014 vintage was the first Syrah I had tasted from Bodegas Caudalia, which is grown in a vineyard up in the Baja Montana at five hundred meters above sea level. The wine is fermented and raised in cement tanks for twenty-seven months prior to bottling. The 2015 is a fine follow-up to the excellent 2014, coming in at a ripe 14.5 percent octane, but offering up sweet dark berries, pepper, spit-roasted game, a touch of chocolate, fine soil tones, woodsmoke and a hint of violet in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, and complex, with a good core, ripe, buried tannins and good length and grip on the focused and well-balanced finish. There is just a whisper of backend heat here, but it is manageable and the wine is once again, impressive on both the nose and palate (and nowhere near as reductive as the 2014 was at a similar stage). 2019-2040. **90**.

2015 Xi’ipal Syrah “La Celada”- Bodegas Caudalia

As I mentioned last year, the Xi’ipal Syrah from Bodegas Caudalia is from the vineyard of “La Celada”, which is a very stony *terroir* situated at five hundred meters above sea level. The vineyard is farmed organically (though not yet certified) and the wine is fermented with indigenous yeasts in cement tanks, with the malolactic fermentation taking place in French puncheons. The 2015 is ripe and classy on the nose, offering up scents of black raspberries, black cherries, pepper, lovely meatiness, stony soil tones, woodsmoke and a nice touch of vanillin oak.

On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and classy, with a good core, fine soil signature, ripe tannins and a long, complex and gently warm finish. This too is 14.5 percent alcohol, but carries it quite well. 2020-2040. **91.**



Rioja Blanco

2018 Rioja Blanco “Monopole”- Cuné (screwcap)

The regular bottling of 2018 Rioja Blanco “Monopole” from Cuné is composed entirely of Viura, fermented and aged for the first year in stainless steel tanks (before six months of rounding out in old casks) and does not undergo malolactic fermentation. The wine offers up a really vibrant and stylish nose of lime, fresh pineapple, salty soil tones, a touch of wild fennel and a topnote of white flowers. On the palate the wine is ripe, crisp and full-bodied, with a good core and soil signature, sound framing acids for this hot summer and good length and grip on the complex finish. My sample bottle was already showing just a touch of reduction on the backend and I decanted it for twenty minutes, which seemed to open it up nicely. However, under screwcap (I suspect the home market sees this wine under natural cork), I would plan to drink it over the next few years, before the screw is turned into permanent reduction. 2019-2022+? **88.**

2016 Rioja Blanco Seco “Monopole Clásico”- Cuné

The 2016 “Monopole Clásico” bottling from Cuné is done in the style of this wine in the decade of the 1970s, when fifteen percent Manzanilla Sherry was added to the blend to give it more character of an aged wine out of the blocks. The bodegas has just started producing this style again in the last couple of years and the 2016 is the most recent vintage of the Clásico style to be released. The wine has a touch of golden color to it, though it is still flecked with green glints and the bouquet delivers a complex blend of lime, tangerine, nutty Sherry tones, salty minerality, citrus peel and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and beautifully balanced, with a fine core, lovely mineral drive and a long, tangy and focused finish. This wine is very tasty upon release, but as the wines from the 1970s have shown, it is also capable of decades of positive evolution in the bottle. A totally unique and compelling wine! 2019-2050+. **93.**

2015 Rioja Blanco- Alegre Valgañón

The 2015 Rioja Blanco from Oscar Alegre and Eva Valgañón is composed of a blend of ninety percent Viura and ten percent of Garnacha Blanco. The wine is raised entirely in older, used French oak demi-muids for a year prior to bottling. The 2015 vintage offers up an outstanding, youthfully complex bouquet of lemon, tart pear, menthol, salty soil tones, wild fennel, white flowers and just a touch of vanillin oak from the older demi-muids. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and impeccably balanced, with a great core, outstanding soil signature and a long, zesty and focused finish. This is just starting to show its secondary layers of complexity and is clearly an old school example of Rioja Blanco and built for a very long life in bottle, so this is only the tip of the iceberg right now. But, it is already so tasty to drink, that I fear that not all that many bottles are going to make it fifteen or twenty years down the road, when the wine will truly be at its apogee! 2018-2045. **93.**

2005 Viña Tondonia Rioja Blanco “Reserva”- López de Heredia

The 2005 Viña Tondonia Rioja Blanco “Reserva” from López de Heredia is really drinking well at age fourteen, with a wide open and beautifully complex personality and a lovely spine of acidity to also carry it far into the future. The complex and classic bouquet wafts from the glass in a mix of lemon, a touch of fig, salty soil tones, paraffin, white flowers, hints of the browned butter tones to come, orange peel and coconutty American oak. On the palate the wine is bright, focused and full-bodied, with excellent depth at the core, zesty acids and a long, well-balanced and very complex finish. This is gorgeous. 2019-2050+. **93.**

Rioja Tinto

2018 Rioja- Bodegas Señorío de P. Peciña (Rioja Alta)

The 2018 Rioja entry level bottling from Bodegas Señorío de P. Peciña is really an excellent wine and a tremendous value. The nose of the 2018 is obviously youthful, but also deep and complex, offering up scents of dark berries, black cherries, a touch of pepper, dark soil tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and tangy, with a good core, just a wisp of fine-grained tannins and a long, well-balanced and impressively serious finish for its level. This will age very nicely and is already quite tasty. 2019-2040+. **88.**

2018 Rioja “Placeres Sensoriales”

The 2018 Rioja “Placeres Sensoriales” is nicely ripe and generous on both the nose and palate, offering up a wide open bouquet of black cherries, dark berries, cigar smoke and a nice

touch of soil. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and succulent, with good focus and grip, bouncy acids and good length and grip on the succulent finish. This is a Joven bottling and made to be drunk young and hits all the right spots in 2018 and is a fine value. 2019-2025. **88.**

2018 Rioja “Acentor”- Isaac Fernandez Selección

The 2018 Rioja “Acentor” from Isaac Fernandez is composed of a blend of eighty-five percent Tempranillo and fifteen percent Graciano and was raised in used French oak barrels for eight months prior to bottling. The wine comes in at fourteen percent and offers up a ripe and deep bouquet of black cherries, dark berries, cigar ash, a bit of tariness, spicy oak and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full and youthful, with a good core, firm, chewy tannins and a long, woody finish. The oak tannins on the backend here need time to integrate, as right now they are uncovered and rather drying. But, the wine seems to have enough stuffing to absorb them in due course and the wine should turn out to be good once the oak has been integrated, and it would have been good to let this wine settle in for six months longer in the cellar before shipping, as it is not yet ready for drinking. 2021-20240. **87+?**

2017 Rioja- Bodegas Señorío de P. Peciña (Rioja Alta)

The 2017 basic bottling of Rioja from Señorío de P. Peciña is a bit more closed than the 2018 version, with equal depth and aging potential, but without quite the veneer of early attractiveness found in the younger vintage. The bouquet is youthful and black fruity, offering up scents of dark berries, cigar ash, a superb base of soil tones, a hint of Barolo-like tariness and a touch of cedar in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and a bit more structured and tannic than the 2018, with a great core of fruit, fine focus and grip and plenty of potential for down the road, but with the need to be tucked away in the cellar for a couple of years. With a bit of patience, this is going to be a steal! 2022-2045. **88+.**

2016 Rioja Tinto- Alegre Valgañón

As I mentioned last year in my review of the 2015 Rioja Tinto from Alegre Valgañón, the husband and wife team of Oscar Alegre and Eva Valgañón only released their first vintage in 2010. They then missed all of 2011, 2012 and 2013 for a myriad of bad circumstances, so in reality, this is only their fourth vintage that they have released from their small vineyard. As I noted last year, their three hectares of vines sit at an altitude of 580 meters in one of the coolest corners of Rioja, with their red Rioja made from a blend of seventy-five percent tempranillo and twenty-five percent garnacha, with the wines raised in a combination of older French *barriques* and *demi-muids*. The couple’s 2016 Tinto is a superb follow-up to the 2015 version, delivering a classy and youthful bouquet of dark berries, black cherries, cigar smoke, coffee grounds, a bit of cedary wood and a very good signature of soil. On the palate the wine is pure, focused and full-bodied, with a fine chassis of ripe tannin, tangy acids, excellent focus and grip and a long, nascently complex and very promising finish. The wine needs cellaring to really blossom properly, but it is going to be superb when it is ready to drink! 2024-2055. **92+.**

2016 Rioja Garnacha- Alegre Valgañón

The 2016 pure bottling of Garnacha Rioja from Alegre Valgañón is pretty ripe, tipping the scales at 14.5 percent alcohol, but the wine is fresh and precise on the nose and really quite well-balanced on the palate as well and handles its octane in exemplary fashion. The bouquet is a fine blend of black raspberries, roasted game, a touch of pepper, bonfire, a fine base of soil tones and a lovely topnote of Rioja spices and a touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with excellent mineral drive, ripe, chewy tannins, impressive

focus and grip and a long, nascently complex and promising finish. Perhaps there is a touch of backend heat here, but it is very unobtrusive and this wine has all of the constituent components in place to age long and gracefully. It is an excellent example of Garnacha. 2026-2055. **92.**

2016 Rioja “Crianza”- Cuné (Rioja Alta)

Cuné’s 2016 Rioja “Crianza” is another of the really good bottlings from this great bodegas that are not part of the Viña Real or Imperial line, but just straight Rioja bottlings that offer up very good quality and fine value. This wine is ripe and nicely black fruity in personality, offering up a nose of cassis, blackberries, cigar wrapper, a good base of soil and a discreet foundation of oak. On the palate the wine is bright, medium-full and tangy, with good intensity of flavor, modest tannins, fine focus and grip and a long, fairly complex and quite tasty finish. This is made for early drinking and is already very tasty, but there is enough structural chassis here to also allow the wine to age nicely. Good juice. 2019-2040. **88.**

2016 Viña Real Rioja “Crianza”- Cuné (Rioja Alta)

The 2016 Viña Real Rioja “Crianza” from Cuné is really a lovely bottle and delivers plenty of complexity and intensity of flavor in a more medium-full format that is light on its feet and already very easy to drink. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a mix of dark berries, black cherries, cigar smoke, dark soil tones, a touch of wild fennel, Rioja spices and cedary oak. On the palate the wine is fullish, complex and tangy, with a solid core, good soil signature, a bit of backend tannin and a long, vibrant and classy finish. This is very drinkable out of the blocks, but I suspect that the wine will get more velvety in texture on the palate with some bottle age. Good juice. 2019-2040+. **89.**

2016 Rioja “Crianza”- Bodegas Viña Otano (Rioja Alta and Alavesa)

The 2016 Rioja “Crianza” from Bodegas Viña Otano is made from fruit sourced in both Rioja Alta and Rioja Alavesa, with the wine raised in a combination of French and American barrels for twelve months. The wine delivers an excellent bouquet of red and black cherries, Rioja spice tones, salty soil tones, cigar wrapper and a nice touch of toasted coconut in the upper register. On the palate the wine is fullish, complex and velvety on the attack, with a good core, fine focus and grip and a long, moderately tannic finish. I like the raw material here immensely, but the wood sticks out a bit on the backend, adding a touch of rigidity at the present time, which should ameliorate with a bit of bottle age. I do not know how old the oak barrels were that this wine was aged in, but I get the impression that there is some new wood here and it would make sense to me to use those casks again and not add any new oak to subsequent vintages for this bottling, as there is such a lovely texture to the fruit component of this wine that it seems silly to have to wait for the oak tannins to better integrate on the backend to enjoy that characteristic fully. That said, this wine has impressive depth and complexity and with a bit of bottle age, it is going to be lovely and is a very fine value. 2021-2045. **89+.**

2016 Viña Albina Rioja “Crianza”- Bodegas Riojanas (Rioja Alta)

The 2016 Viña Albina Rioja “Crianza” from Bodegas Riojanas is a beautifully perfumed and classical expression of the region, offering up a complex nose of cherries, a touch of black raspberry, Rioja spice tones, a touch of cigar wrapper, lovely soil tones and cedary wood. On the palate the wine is medium-full, suave and youthfully complex, with a bit of ripe tannin, good focus and grip and a long, bouncy finish. This does not have the mid-palate depth of a Reserva, but it has plenty of personality and is a very good value. Good juice. 2019-2035+. **89.**

2016 Monte Real Rioja “Crianza”- Bodegas Riojanas (Rioja Alta)

The 2016 Monte Real Rioja “Crianza” from Bodegas Riojanas is a tad riper than the Viña Albina version, coming in at 13.5 percent octane, but offering up excellent purity on both the

nose and palate. The bouquet is first class, wafting from the glass in a mix of black cherries, sweet dark berries, Cuban cigar, just a dollop of incipient spice elements, a fine base of soil and a nice, discreet foundation of smoky new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and shows quite a bit more depth at the core than the Albina Crianza, with moderate tannins, good very balance and grip and a long, focused and nascently complex finish. This is approachable today, but really deserves at least a few years in the cellar to start to blossom. It is an excellent example of Crianza and will age significantly longer than the Albina version. 2021-2045+. **90+**.

2015 Rioja Imperial “Reserva”- Cuné (Rioja Alta)

The 2015 Rioja Imperial “Reserva” from Cuné is pretty ripe by the standards of this bottling, as it comes in at fourteen percent octane, but that is the nature of this torrid vintage. The wine handles its ripeness beautifully, offering up a pure and complex bouquet of black plums, sweet dark berries, cigar wrapper, toasted coconut, a touch of eucalyptus, a beautiful base of dark soil tones and a suave foundation of oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, ripe and plush at the core, with tangy acids, ripe, firm tannins and outstanding length and grip on the nascently complex and perfectly balanced finish. This is a big boy for an Imperial bottling, but it handles the vintage adroitly and the wine is going to be a knockout in the fullness of time- but, it needs some cellaring to soften up and start to blossom. 2024-2075. **93**.

2015 Monte Real Rioja Reserva- Bodegas Riojanas (Rioja Alta)

The 2015 Monte Real Rioja Reserva from Bodegas Riojanas is a big-boned beauty in this blazingly hot summer, coming in at a robust 14.5 percent alcohol. The wine does show a touch of *sur maturité* on the nose, but also lovely focus and depth, as it delivers a blend of black cherries, chocolate, roasted game, Rioja spice tones, coffee grounds, cigar smoke and cedary oak. On the palate the wine is deep, ripe and impressively precise and light on its feet for its octane, with a full-bodied format, good depth at the core, no shortage of soil signature and a long, slightly warm, ripely tannic finish. This is admirably balanced and classical in personality for such a hot growing season, and in the context of the vintage, this is a great success. 2019-2045+. **89**.

2014 Rioja “Reserva”- Cuné (Rioja Alta)

The 2014 Rioja “Reserva” from Cuné is an excellent wine and another really fine value form this great, old school bodegas. The bouquet is deep, complex and already very expressive, wafting from the glass in a mix of black cherries, sweet dark berries, smoky oak, a bit of toasted coconut, a fine base of soil tones and a topnote of cigar smoke. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and tangy, with an excellent core of fruit, impressive focus and grip, suave, buried tannins and great length and grip on the complex and vibrant finish. This is simply stellar Rioja Reserva! 2019-2060. **92**.

2014 Viña Real Rioja “Reserva”- Cuné (Rioja Alta)

The 2014 Viña Real Rioja “Reserva” from Cuné has been raised in a combination of both French and American oak casks, but the French oak influence is pretty minimal in the wine at the present time. The bouquet is deep and nicely reserved, auguring well for its future evolution, as it offers up a combination of cassis, black cherries, cigar ash, a bit of roasted meat, dark soil tones, espresso, cedar and a bit of smoky American oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and utterly classical in profile, with a lovely core, great soil signature, seamless tannins and outstanding length and grip on the balanced and complex finish. This is going to be a very, very elegant vintage of Viña Real Reserva in the fullness of time, and though it is already very easy on the palate if opened today to appreciate its youthful charm. 2019-2075. **92+**.



2014 Viña Alberdi Rioja “Reserva”- La Rioja Alta (Rioja Alta)

The 2014 Viña Alberdi Reserva from La Rioja Alta is produced entirely from tempranillo and raised entirely in American oak casks. The wine spends two years in barrel, with the first in new oak and the second in three year-old casks, with bottling not taking place until June of 2017. The bouquet is pure and utterly classical in personality, wafting from the glass in a mix of plums, raspberries, cigar wrapper, a fine base of soil, a touch of nutmeg and a lovely base of toasted coconut oak tones from the American casks. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and already nicely velvety on the attack, with a fine core of fruit, lovely soil signature, seamless tannins and fine length and grip on the complex and beautifully balanced finish. First class, old school Rioja! 2019-2050. **92.**

2014 Rioja “Crianza”- Bodegas Señorío de P. Peciña (Rioja Alta)

The 2014 Rioja “Crianza” from Bodegas Señorío de P. Peciña is a fine bottle in the making, but this is about as young an example of Crianza as I have tasted in quite some time. The bouquet is pure, but reticent today, eventually offering up scents of red and black cherries, a touch of fresh nutmeg, cigar smoke, a fine base of soil and just a whisper of American oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and tangy, with a good structural chassis, moderate tannins and a long, tangy and totally primary finish. This is going to be quite good, but needs a bit of bottle age. 2022-2045+. **89+.**

2014 Rioja Reserva - Torre de Oña (Rioja Alavesa)

The “regular” bottling of Rioja Reserva from Torre de Oña is composed of ninety-five percent Tempranillo and five percent Mazuelo. However, in a twist from the traditional side of

Rioja *elevage*, the wine is raised in a combination of seventy percent French casks, twenty percent Caucasian barrels and only ten percent American oak casks. The 2014 version is fourteen percent alcohol and offers up a very black fruity bouquet of cassis, dark berries, coffee grounds, cigar smoke, some balsamic overtones and a smorgasbord of smoky oak. On the palate the wine is ripe, full-bodied and velvety on the attack, with a good core, but not a whole lot of focus showing out of the blocks. There are some tannins buried on the backend here and the wine may gain more precision on the finish with bottle age, but right now, despite some good constituent components here, the wine seems a bit stylistically muddled to me and I am not sure in which direction it is heading. Maybe if it were raised all in American oak it would be more reassuring stylistically? Not a bad wine, but is it a good example of Rioja? I have scored the wine in a range, as I really have no idea how it is going to evolve with bottle age, but it could pull itself together and easily rate at the top of the scale. 2022-2045+. **85-90?**

2014 Rioja Reserva “Finca Martelo”- Torre de Oña (Rioja Alavesa)

The 2014 Finca Martelo Rioja “Reserva” from Torre de Oña is produced from the very oldest parcels of vines that the bodegas owns. It is almost entirely Tempranillo in composition, with just a small percentage of Mazuelo, Garnacha and Viura included in the *cépages*. The wine is aged in a combination of eighty percent American oak and twenty percent French casks for two years *elevage*. The wine comes in quite ripe in 2014, listing at 14.5 percent octane, but offering up very good purity in its complex aromatic constellation of black cherries, raspberries, grilled gamebird, Rioja spice tones, incipient notes of nuttiness, cigar smoke and a lovely base of coconutty American oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with a bit of backend heat from its octane level, well-integrated tannins and impressive length and grip on the complex finish. This is a bit riper than I would like, but it handles its alcohol pretty well and has impressive depth and complexity. I have to keep its score down a couple of points for the bit of backend heat here, but for those less sensitive to octane, this wine has a lot to offer and you should figure it at another three points higher than my score! Torre de Oña is now owned by La Rioja Alta, so you know the winemaking here is impeccable. 2019-2045+. **89.**

2013 Viña Albina Rioja “Reserva”- Bodegas Riojanas (Rioja Alta)

The 2013 Viña Albina Rioja “Reserva” is a beautifully refined and classic bottle in the making from Bodegas Riojanas. The bouquet is still youthful, but precise and very promising, wafting from the glass in a mix of black raspberries, black cherries, cigar smoke, cloves, a touch of nutskin, excellent soil tones and a fine framing of spicy oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and potentially quite velvety, with a good core, excellent soil signature, suave tannins and a long, complex and very nicely balanced finish. This is still a tad on the young side for primetime drinking (though certainly approachable), but all of the constituent components are in place for a fine, long and refined life in bottle! A first class Reserva. 2022-2050+. **91.**

2012 Rioja “Gran Reserva”- Cuné (Rioja Alta)

The 2012 Rioja “Gran Reserva” from Cuné is interesting that it is neither Viña Real or Imperial, which are usually the two cuvées where one will find a Gran Reserva bottling being produced. The wine is raised in a combination of French and American oak casks and offers up an excellent, youthful bouquet of dark berries, black cherries, cigar smoke, toasted coconut, lovely soil and a nice combination of both cedar and American oak tones in a discreet base. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very elegant in profile, with an excellent core, tangy acids, moderate, seamless tannins and outstanding energy and bounce on the long and complex

finish. Fans of Viña Real and Imperial would be very well-served not to ignore this bottling, as it is outstanding in quality and offers up superb value! 2019-2065. **92.**

2012 Rioja Imperial “Gran Reserva”- Cuné (Rioja Alta)

The 2012 Imperial “Gran Reserva” from Cuné is a superb young wine in the making, but this is a pretty ripe vintage for this iconic bottling, as it comes in at fourteen percent octane, but it is emblematic of the classical elegance of this cuvée. The bouquet is deep, still fairly primary and very promising, offering up scents of black cherries, sweet dark berries, dried eucalyptus, Cuban cigars, a superb base of soil and a smoky foundation of American oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and beautifully plush down at the core, with fine-grained tannins, impeccable focus and balance and a very, very long, nascently complex finish. This is more reserved on the palate than the nose suggests (and also more backward than the 2015 Imperial Reserva) and is in need of some extended cellaring to really blossom, despite its seamless balance today. In due course, this will be brilliant wine. 2024-2085. **93+.**

2012 Viña Real Rioja “Gran Reserva”- Cuné (Rioja Alta)

The 2012 Viña Real Rioja “Gran Reserva” from Cuné is a touch less ripe than the Imperial version in this vintage, coming in listed at 13.5 percent alcohol. The wine offers up a beautifully refined, young bouquet of cassis, dark berries, Rioja spice tones, cigar wrapper, dark soil, cedar, a touch of toasted coconut and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and quite elegant in profile, with lovely mid-palate depth, still a fair bit of backend tannin to perk up the finish and outstanding length and grip on the complex and very promising backend. This too will be outstanding with sufficient bottle age, but I would try to leave it alone in a cool corner of the cellar for at least the next five years and let it really settle in and start to purr. 2024-2085. **93.**

2012 Rioja “Viña Arana” Gran Reserva- La Rioja Alta (Rioja Alta)

This is the first vintage of Viña Arana Gran Reserva that I can ever recall having tasted, as most of my experience with this cuvée has been at the Reserva level. The bouquet here is still youthful and has loads more complexity to offer with bottle age, but it is utterly classical in profile and is awfully easy already to fall in love with, as it offers up scents of red and black raspberries, cigar wrapper, Rioja spices, a fine base of soil and a lovely foundation of toasted coconut American oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, velvety on the attack and rock solid at the core, with ripe, seamless tannins, tangy acids and great focus and grip on the long, nascently complex and beautifully balanced finish. This is the finest example of Viña Arana that I have ever tasted! It is tasty now, but still a puppy and will be far better five to ten years down the road. 2019-2075. **93.**

2010 Viña Ardanza Rioja “Reserva Selección Especial”- La Rioja Alta (Rioja Alta)

The 2010 Viña Ardanza Rioja “Selección Especial” from La Rioja Alta is made of its customary blend of tempranillo and garnacha, but in 2010, the garnacha was sourced from a very stony vineyard in Rioja Baja, rather than from vineyards in Rioja Alta sub-region. The wine’s blend ended up being eighty percent tempranillo and twenty percent of this Rioja Baja-sourced garnacha, with the tempranillo component aged for three years in four year-old American oak barrels, and the garnacha component aged for two and a half years in two and three year-old American casks. The 2010 Ardanza Selección Especial is darker in color this year, probably from the inclusion of Rioja Baja fruit in the blend, and offers up an excellent bouquet of plums, black cherries, cigar wrapper, toasted coconut, a touch of spice, a fine base of soil tones and a gentle savory topnote. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and velvety, with a superb core

of fruit, lovely soil signature, moderate, buried tannins and excellent length and grip on the ripe and complex finish. This is a superb bottle of Ardanza that will make old bones, but is so well-balanced at this relatively young age that it is not going to be easy to keep one's hands off of bottles in the cellar! 2019-2060. **93+**.

2010 Viña Albina Rioja “Gran Reserva”- Bodegas Riojanas (Rioja Alta)

The 2010 Viña Albina Rioja “Gran Reserva” from Bodegas Riojanas is an outstanding wine. At nine years of age it is starting to really drink well, but has decades of life still ahead of it. The lovely bouquet wafts from the glass in a mix of plums, black cherries, cigar smoke, Rioja spice tones, a fine base of soil and a fine base of smoky oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely velvety already on the attack, with a sappy core, good soil signature and grip, impeccable balance and a very long, refined and ripely tannic finish. While this bottling is starting to really stretch its wings, it is still in climbing mode and will be even better with another five years or more in the cellar. And outstanding Gran Reserva. 2019-2060. **93**.

2010 Viña Cubillo Rioja “Crianza”- López de Heredia (Rioja Alta)

The new release of 2010 Viña Cubillo from López de Heredia is fairly ripe, coming in at 13.5 percent, and offering up plenty of upfront pleasure, but still has the structure to age quite nicely over at least the mid-term. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a complex blend of red and black raspberries, Rioja spice tones, a touch of cigar wrapper, a nice base of soil tones and a discreet foundation of coconutty oak. On the palate the wine is fullish, fairly complex and very well-balanced, with moderate tannins, bright acids and pretty good length and grip on the well-balanced finish. This has plenty of personality, and though it is not overly complex today, it is very easy to drink, and it will be even better with a bit of bottle age. 2019-2045+. **89+**.

2010 Rioja “904” Gran Reserva- La Rioja Alta (Rioja Alta)

The 2010 Rioja “904” Gran Reserva from La Rioja Alta is just beautiful on both the nose and palate. It is still fundamentally a young wine and will continue to improve for many years to come, but it is starting to really show well at age nine and is already pretty hard not to want to drink in its bloom of youthful exuberance. The very complex nose wafts from the glass in a blend of raspberries, red plums, fresh nutmeg, cloves, cigar wrapper, beautiful soil tones, toasted coconut and a lovely framing of oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and starting to get velvety on the attack, with a great core of fruit, stellar soil signature, tangy acids, fine-grained tannins and outstanding length and grip on the very complex and perfectly balanced finish. This is an utter classic in the making and a brilliant young Rioja, but it firms up a bit as it sits in decanter and probably deserves at least a few more years' worth of bottle age before having at it in earnest. 2022-2075. **94+**.

2010 Monte Real Rioja Gran Reserva- Bodegas Riojanas (Rioja Alta)

The 2010 Monte Real Gran Reserva is a bit riper in style than some other recent vintages of this wine, and hence is a bit more monolithic in profile at the present time. The bouquet offers up plenty of depth and pure, ripe fruit, wafting from the glass in a mix of cassis, black cherries, cigar smoke, a bit of dark soil, gentle notes of bitter chocolate, cedar and a bit of coconutty American oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still quite primary, with lovely plushness on the attack, a rock solid core, ripe, well-integrated tannins and fine focus and balance on the long, youthful finish. The 2010 vintage in Rioja has the higher reputation, due to its greater ripeness than 2011, but my gut feeling is that the latter vintage will produce the more complex wines over the long haul. That said, this is still a very good wine and will appeal more to those that like a bit more powerful style of Rioja. 2030-2100. **92**.

2007 Viña Bosconia Rioja “Reserva”- López de Heredia (Rioja Alta)

The 2007 Viña Bosconia Rioja “Reserva” is the most recent arrival of this iconic bottling from López de Heredia and the wine is absolutely stunning on both the nose and palate. This is not a very powerful vintage of Bosconia, but rather one that highlights the supreme elegance and original Burgundian inspiration of this bottling. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a lovely and wide open blend of red plums, raspberries, cloves, cinnamon, complex soil tones, a touch of toasted coconut and a topnote of cigar smoke. On the palate the wine is fullish, refined and intensely flavored, with lovely soil signature, tangy acids, fine focus and grip and a long, moderately tannic and beautifully balanced, complex finish. This is so light on its feet and yet has excellent depth and backend length and grip. This is all too easy to drink already, but at age twelve, it is really still on the youthful side and will get more velvety and complex over the coming five to ten years, and will age long and gracefully. The challenge will be not drinking it early on, as it is already pretty irresistible. Fine, fine juice. 2019-2065+. **94.**



2001 Viña Tondonia Rioja “Reserva”- López de Heredia

The 2001 Viña Tondonia Rioja “Reserva” from López de Heredia is a truly beautiful wine in the making. At age eighteen, it is drinking with a great degree of style and polish, but is still in climbing mode and will be even better down the road than it is today! The gorgeous bouquet wafts from the glass in a mix of cherries, raspberries, toasted coconut, cloves, salty soil elements, cigar wrapper, cinnamon and orange zest in the upper register. On the palate the wine

is pure, full-bodied, refined and nicely tangy, with a lovely core of fruit, great soil signature, moderate, buried tannins and stunning length and grip on the vibrant and very complex finish. This is not a powerful wine by any stretch of the imagination, but rather a vibrant, intensely flavored and beautifully transparent wine of breed and stellar complexity. 2001 is a great vintage in Rioja and the Viña Tondonia “Reserva” has fully captured all of the potential of this magical year. It is delicious now and is only going to get better for the next couple of decades. 2019-2065+. **94.**

1970 Rioja “Viña Arana” Sexto Año- La Rioja Alta (Rioja Alta)

This particular bottle of the 1970 Rioja “Viña Arana” Sexto Año from La Rioja Alta was purchased at auction a few years ago, and I was very pleased to see that when the bottle arrived it had a Rare Wine Company strip label on it, meaning it had come from Spain as a late release in the not too distant past. The wine is still drinking beautifully and remains in its plateau of peak maturity, offering up a vibrant and complex bouquet of raspberries, plums, sweet tobacco, lovely spice tones, a touch of orange zest, cigar smoke and a bit of roasted gamebird. On the palate the wine is pure, velvety and still full-bodied, with melted tannins, fine remaining acidity, lovely focus and grip, plenty of depth at the core and a long, beautifully balanced and tertiary finish. This still has plenty of life in it, but it has been at its peak for a couple of decades already and I have to imagine that one will reach the point of diminishing returns in another half dozen years or so and the wine will then start its gentle decline down the far side of the plateau. Today, it is reasonably fragile and should not be decanted for too long before drinking, but over the first hour that it is open, it is very pleasing. 2019-2035. **89.**

Vinos de la Tierra de Castilla

2017 Tempranillo “Sinfonía”- Bodegas Abanico

The 2017 Sinfonía from Bodegas Abanico is a very good bottle of tempranillo, that, as I have said about past vintages, bears more than a passing resemblance to a fine Ribera del Duero at a fraction of the price! The wine delivers a fine aromatic constellation of cherries, plums, a touch of clove-like spiciness, woodsmoke, a bit of cigar wrapper and a nice touch of American oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and a bit raisiny in personality than the last couple of vintages (perhaps there is a bit of sunburn on the skins this year?), with a good core, moderate tannins and good length and grip on the complex finish. I like this vintage better on the nose than palate right now, but perhaps I am being unfair, as the last three vintages were just so stunning for their price, and this is merely very good! 2019-2027+. **88.**

Toro

2016 Vioire “5 Meses en Barrica” Tinto- Bodegas Torredueiro

The 2016 Vioire “5 Meses en Barrica” Tinto from Bodegas Torredueiro is a typically ripe wine, as most Toros are these days, coming in at 14.5 percent octane. The wine is composed entirely of tempranillo and spent five months aging in American oak casks during its *elevage*. The bouquet is ripe, but not overripe, as it offers up a mix of black cherries, chocolate, saddle leather, cigar smoke and a nice, discreet base of spicy American oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with a fair bit of chewy backend tannin, good focus and grip and a long, youthful and tasty finish. This manages its octane very nicely and is not hot on the backend, but it is a typically robust example of Toro and a few years in the cellar will help tame those tannins on the finish. A good example. 2021-2040+. **89.**

Costers del Segre

2017 Gotim Bru- Castell del Remei

The 2017 Gotim Bru from Castell del Remei is composed of a blend of twenty-five percent garnaxta, thirteen percent cabernet sauvignon, eight percent syrah, nine percent merlot and forty-five percent tempranillo and comes in listed at an even fourteen percent octane. The wine is aged in French oak casks for ten months, but I am not sure what percentage is renewed each year. The bouquet is deep, sappy and ripe, but not overripe in personality, offering up scents of black cherries, sweet dark berries, woodsmoke, a bit of roasted meats, *garrigue* and a touch of spicy new oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied and nicely plush on the attack, with a lovely core of fruit, moderate tannins and a long, complex and well-balanced finish. This is a well-made wine that is approachable today, but will be even more interesting with a few years in the cellar to let the tannins soften up a bit more on the backend. 2022-2042+. **89.**

Montsant

2017 Montsant “17 XI”- Buil & Giné

The 2017 Montsant “17 XI” from Buil & Giné is a typically ripe wine for this region next door to Priorat, coming in at 14.5 percent octane, but offering pretty good balance and managing its alcohol as well as can be expected, so that there is freshness here and not more than a moderate hint of backend heat. The wine is a blend of Garnaxta and Cariñena and offers up a quite attractive bouquet of black raspberries, bonfires, *garrigue*, spiced meats and a good base of stony soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely spicy, with a good core of fruit, nicely integrated, ripe tannins and good length and grip on the complex and focused finish. As I said, there is a whisper of backend heat, but it is hardly obtrusive and the overall effect is a good, long finish. This has plenty of personality and is a good value. 2019-2030. **89.**

La Mancha

2016 EA!- Manuel Manzaneque Suárez

The 2016 EA! from Manuel Manzaneque Suárez is once again a very well-made and tasty bottle of wine. As I have mentioned in the past, this cuvée is crafted from forty to seventy year-old Cencibel vines (the local name for Tempranillo) and the wine is aged in twenty-five percent new French casks. The 2016 EA! comes in at 13.5 percent octane and delivers a fine nose of sweet dark berries, coffee grounds, cigar smoke, a nice touch of meatiness, some balsamic overtones and a good base of dark soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and ripe, with a good core of fruit, a bit of chewy tannin and good length and grip on the slightly overripe, but complex finish. This is perhaps a touch higher in alcohol than its stated level, but it is a wine still with plenty of personality and offers good value. I liked the fresher 2015 a bit better than this riper 2016. 2019-2025+. **87.**

Canary Islands

2017 Listán Negro “El Ciruelo” Viñas Viejas- Suertes del Marqués (Tenerife)

Jonatan Garcia Lima is the owner of this winery and the custodian of a lot of truly ancient vines, which he farms organically. The vines are trained in a traditional manner where they let the vines grow out from the main base and are braided together to run down the sides of the volcano where they grow. The wines are fermented with indigenous yeasts and raised in big, old *foudres* and bottled with as lightest of filtrations to retain as much character as possible. The El Ciruelo is from vines that are eighty to well more than a century in age and the 2017 version is

excellent, offering up a deep and very elegant nose of bitter cherry, volcanic soil, woodsmoke, gamebird, chicory and a beautiful array of botanical overtones. On the palate the wine is medium-full, complex and beautifully transparent, with good intensity of flavor (but not the sheer mid-palate stuffing of the La Solana), lovely focus and grip, suave tannins and a long, complex and light on its feet finish. This is the most understated of the three red wine bottlings from Suertes del Marqués that I tasted for this report, but it has great balance and is going to age very well indeed and it will have no problem keeping pace with bottle age with its slightly flashier stable-mates. 2024-2060. **92+**.

2017 Listán Negro “El Chibirique” Viñas Viejas- Suertes del Marqués (Tenerife)

The 2017 Listán Negro “El Chibirique” Viñas Viejas from Jonatan Garcia Lima is produced from vines that range from sixty to eighty years of age, and like all of these old vines, the branches are allowed to grow out long from the “mother vine” and then braided together as they cascade down the hillside of the volcano on the island. This bottling has the most overt botanical notes of these single vineyards, but not in a bad way by any means, as it offers up a very complex bouquet of dark berries, a myriad of fresh herb tones, pepper, volcanic soil and a bit of roasted meats. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, complex and ripely tannic, with great transparency, an impressive core of fruit and a long, youthful and promising finish. Of these various single *parcela* wines from Señor Garcia, this is the most structured and backward and it needs some time in the cellar to blossom, but it will be very, very good in the fullness of time. 2025-2060. **90+**.

2017 Listán Negro “La Solana” Viñas Viejas- Suertes del Marqués (Tenerife)

The single *parcela* bottling of La Solana from Suertes del Marqués is made from extremely old vines, with the youngest in this plot around eighty years of age and most of them well over a century and some approaching age one hundred and fifty. The wine is terrific on both the nose and palate, with the bouquet offering up a youthfully complex nose of dark berries, bonfires, a bit of roasted game, lovely savory elements, chicory, tree bark and a great base of volcanic soil. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very complex, with an old vine creaminess, great transparency and grip, ripe, buried tannins and a long, tangy and beautifully focused finish. This is a superb wine, but I would try to tuck it away in the cellar for a few years and let it properly blossom, as it is still a bit primary in personality, despite its already impressive complexity! 2023-2060. **93**.

2017 El Lance “7 Fuentes” Tinto- Suertes del Marqués (Tenerife)

The 2017 El Lance “7 Fuentes” Tinto from Suertes del Marqués is composed of a blend of thirty-five percent each of Listán Negro and Vijareigo Negro and thirty percent Castellano Negro. The wine is raised in a combination of old French casks and cement tanks. The 2017 El Lance offers up a peppery nose of dark berries, Canary Island botanicals, pepper, dark soil tones and tree bark. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, juicy and nicely tangy from the volcanic soils, with a good core of fruit, moderate tannins and lovely focus and grip on the long and complex finish. Many of the vines that go into this bottling are also one hundred years of age. This is good juice that is quite approachable already, despite a fair chassis of well-integrated tannins, but it could do with a bit of time in the cellar to let the tannins soften up just a bit more. 2019-2045+. **92**.

2016 Listán Negro “El Esquilón”- Suertes del Marqués (Tenerife)

The 2016 Listán Negro from the El Esquilón vineyard from Suertes del Marqués is one of the estate’s “younger vine” bottlings, as these vines are *only* eighty years of age! The 2016 El

Esquilón Listán Negro here is excellent, offering up a pure and complex bouquet of dark berries, pepper, volcanic soils, a touch of tree bark, plenty of Canary Island botanicals and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is medium-full, tangy and soil-driven, with lovely intensity of flavor, moderate tannins, lovely focus and grip and a long, complex and beautifully balanced finish. Fine, fine juice. 2019-2050. **92.**



Portugal

Bairrada

2017 Bairrada Tinto “Nat Cool”- Dirk Niepoort (Quinta de Baixo)

The 2017 Bairrada Tinto “Nat Cool” from Dirk Niepoort is made entirely from the Baga grape and comes in at a very civilized twelve percent alcohol. The wine offers up a juicy and wide open bouquet of black cherries, woodsmoke, spice tones, a dollop of soil and a touch of fresh herbs in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, open and easy-going, with very little tannin, good depth at the core and a long, succulent finish. This is made to be an easy to drink red that requires no aging and will go with a wide range of foods. It is a good example of its intended genre. 2019-2024. **87.**

2016 Quinta de Baixo Tinto - Dirk Niepoort

The 2016 Quinta de Baixo Tinto from Dirk Niepoort is made entirely from the Baga grape variety of the region. The wine starts out its first fermentation in a combination of stainless steel tanks and stone *lagares*, before being racked into old, 2500 liter French *foudres* to finish up the alcoholic fermentation and undergo malo. It is then aged in these same old *foudres* for twenty months prior to bottling. The 2016 Quinta de Baixo comes in listed at the low octane of 11.5 percent and offers up a black fruity nose of cassis, dark soil tones, chicory, woodsmoke, a touch of anise and a dollop of botanicals in the upper register. On the palate the wine is medium-full, focused and modestly tannic, with good balance and grip, nice intensity of flavor and a long, gently chewy and nascently complex finish. This is a stylish middleweight that could do with a few years' worth of bottle age to let its backend tannins soften up a bit. Good juice. 2022-2050. **90.**

2015 Vinho Branco- Gonçalves Faria

Gonçalves Faria was one of the top producer in Bairrada in the 1990s, but since António Maria Gonçalves Faria passed away, his son has focused on farming the family's vineyards and Dirk Niepoort is overseeing the winemaking here. This bottling is produced from eighty year-old vines of two varieties: Bical and Maria Gomes. The wine is fermented and aged in thousand liter *foudres* and bottled after a year and a half of *elevage*. The 2015 Vinho Branco offers up a fine bouquet of pear, green olive, raw almond, salty soil tones, spring flowers and a touch of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and nicely soil-driven, with good framing acids, fine focus and grip and a long, complex finish. There is just a touch of volatile acidity in this wine, so decanting it is probably a prudent course, but there is a lot to like here as well. 2019-2030. **90.**

Douro

2018 Redoma Branco- Dirk Niepoort

The 2018 Redoma Branco from Dirk Niepoort is composed of a varietal blend that I am generally unfamiliar with, other than the Arinto grape. Others in the *cépages* include Rabigato, Codega and Viosinho. The wine is barrel-fermented with indigenous yeasts and aged ten months in cask prior to bottling. The 20178 Redoma Branco offers up a nose of bread fruit, dried flowers, a nice base of soil and a bit of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and well-balanced, with good focus, length and grip. This wine is okay, shows no flaws, but seems somewhat stuck in neutral and is pretty anonymous in personality, despite solid depth and length. Maybe it is just too young and a bit more personality will emerge with some bottle age? 2019-2025+? **86+?**

2017 Charme Tinto - Dirk Niepoort

This is one of the new dry red wines from Dirk Niepoort. It is made up of a blend of principally Tinto Roriz and Touriga Franca, with some other varieties included in small quantities. The vines range in age from seventy to one hundred years of age and grow at an elevation of two hundred to four hundred and fifty meters above sea level. The grapes are foot-trodden as whole clusters and then fermented in French casks, with the wine's *elevage* consisting of fourteen months in these barrels. The 2017 Charme comes in at 13.5 percent octane and offers up a balanced and nicely new oak nose of black cherries, cigar smoke, a bit of chocolate, black tea and a stylish base of smoky new oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied and impressively

light on its feet, with good, tangy acids, fine focus and grip and a long, complex and moderately tannic finish. The fairly modern nose here is still quite primary, but the wine is showing more complexity and soil signature already on the palate and I have little doubt that the bouquet will catch up in due course. This is good juice in the making. 2023-2055. **92.**

2017 Twisted Tinto - Dirk Niepoort

Dirk Niepoort's "Twisted" Tinto is made from a complex field blend of grapes that includes Touriga Franca, Touriga Nacional, Tinto Roriz, Tinto Amarela, Tinto Cão and more than a few others. Three quarters of the cuvée is raised in stainless steel tanks and the other quarter in older, French casks. The 2017 Twisted Tinto comes in listed at fourteen percent and delivers a complex bouquet of ripe black fruit, dark soil tones, chocolate, a bit of saddle leather, bonfires and coffee grounds. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and fairly youthful, with a good core, ripe tannins and good length and grip on the still quite primary finish. The wine is not yet showing a lot of complexity, but with all those different grape varieties in the blend, one has to assume that is only a function of its relative youth and more will emerge with bottle age. 2022-2050. **89.**

2016 Redoma Tinto - Dirk Niepoort

The 2016 Redoma Tinto from Dirk Niepoort is again a complex field blend, with perhaps as many as thirty-five different varieties in the cuvée, but it is primarily based on Touriga Franca and Tinto Roriz. These are old vines, with the range from sixty to one hundred and twenty years of age. The wine is fermented with native yeasts in a combination of stainless steel and stone *lagares*, after the grapes are foot-trodden, and the cuvée is aged in French oak casks of 228 liters for twenty-one months prior to bottling. The wine is twelve percent octane and offers up a youthful bouquet of dark berries, cassis, cigar smoke, a bit of *garrigue*, coffee grounds, dark soil tones and a bit of smoky oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and nicely balanced, with a good core, fine soil signature, moderately chewy tannins and fine length and grip on the promising finish. This is nicely light on its feet, but has a bit more stuffing at the core than the Vertente bottling. Good juice. 2025-2055. **91+.**

2016 Vertente Tinto - Dirk Niepoort

The Vertente Tinto bottling from Dirk Niepoort is composed of another field blend, with the dominant varieties being Touriga Franca, Tinto Amarela and Tinto Roriz. The wine is fermented in stainless steel tanks with indigenous yeasts and undergoes malolactic in French barrels. The 2016 Vertente comes in listed at a svelte 12.5 percent alcohol and offers up a fine bouquet of cassis, dark berries, a bit of tariness, dark soil tones, cigar smoke and cedar. On the palate the wine is fullish, light on its feet and long, with good intensity of flavor, fine-grained tannins and sneaky length and grip on the well-balanced finish. This does not show a lot of mid-palate depth right now, but it has good complexity and length and it may put on weight in the bottle. If it does, my score will seem a touch conservative. 2022-2050. **89.**