

CHAMPAGNE & SPARKLING WINE

Over 2 billion bottles of sparkling wine are made in the world each year, but only about 300 million of these are made in that magical place known as Champagne. It is a small demarcated region in Northern France about an hours drive from Paris.

Only wine from this small area is allowed to be labelled "Champagne". The special status of the district depends upon a unique series of circumstances that have made the region the most outstandingly well suited in the world to the production of sparkling wines. Apart from the cool conditions, the special chalky soil with Belimnite chalk in the Grand Cru vineyards is the foremost explanation for the superiority of the district compared to its rivals.

There are three main grape varieties grown in Champagne. Almost 40% of all vines planted are Pinot Noir, with Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay both around 30%. Over and above these three classic types, less than half a percent is devoted to Arbanne, Petit Meslier, Gamay, Fromenteau, En Fume and Pinot Blanc.

There are 19,000 growers in Champagne, but only about 4,700 of these sell under their own labels. Truth be known, over half of these would actually get their wines made within a co-operative. The actual number of growers who actually grow, vinify, ferment and bottle their own wines would be around 2000. Champagne houses only own 12% of the vineyards in Champagne – they buy the majority of their grape needs from growers. One reason why I have chosen to focus strongly on the small grower/producers is because I believe they represent the best value for money and the most "true" product available. In most cases the person who grows the grapes, also crushes them and lovingly bottles them. Not to mention decides on the dosage, the way the label should look and name of the wines and anything else personally related to it. Often it is a family run operation.

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

- Lily Bollinger

NOT CHAMPAGNE

N.V. Varichon & Clerc Brut (Savoie, France) (200ml) \$16.00

A bright pale yellow colour with fine and persistent bubbles. The nose is fresh and inviting with delicate aromas of ripe yellow apple, melon and pear overlaid by hints of opulent acacia flowers and the light fragrance of leavening dough. Beautiful.

N.V. Santa & D'Sasi Moscato (Swan Hill, Victoria) (375ml) \$26.00

A true Moscato d' Asti style that is fresh, aromatic and delicate with a fruitiness that is balanced by acidity and spritz.

CASA Sparkling Brut (King Valley, Victoria) \$39.00

A bright pale yellow colour with fine and persistent bubbles. The nose is fresh and inviting with delicate aromas of ripe yellow apple, melon and pear overlaid by hints of opulent acacia flowers and the light fragrance of leavening dough. Beautiful pure stone fruit & baked apple flavours, very fresh, against a soft and smooth finish.

N.V. Santa & D'Sasi Prosecco (King Valley, Victoria) \$46.00

Distinctive and fragrant nose of fresh apples, lime and pear aromas along with the faintest hint of elderflowers. Crisp, clean and delicate with fine bubbles on the palate. Intense flavours of apples and citrus lead to a finish with lingering fruit and floral notes.

N.V. Bress Sparkling Brut (Macedon, Victoria) \$52.00

The fruit for this fizz was grown in three different Victorian regions, Macedon, Yarra Valley and the southern end of the Bendigo. The Chardonnay heavy blend gives the wine length while the Pinot Noir provides generosity and richness. A splash of Riesling has been used to add fruit definition and a lick of vibrancy.

N.V. Balgownie Estate Cuvée Sparkling Brut (Bendigo, Victoria) \$45.00

Bright and lifted aromas of pear, citrus and new season apples with hints of guava and passion fruit and a touch of toasty brioche character. It has a lovely fine bead and an elegant crisp finish.

N.V. Jo Ladron Atmospheres (Loire Valley, France) \$78.00

Ladron also crafts this brilliant value méthode traditionnelle, that he calls Cuvée Atmosphères. It's a hand-harvested, naturally fermented, low dosage bubbles that shows up many a conventional and big name Champagne for both quality and value. Having found Muscadet's Melon de Bourgogne unsuitable for sparkling wine, Jo uses a hand-harvested blend of Folle Blanche and a little Chardonnay. The aromatics are just lovely, delicate, floral, with a white stone and white peach character. A very gentle palate follows, showing some lightly honeyed fruit cast against a mineral background and a fine pétillance too.

CHAMPAGNE

N.V. CHAMPAGNE JEROME BLIN Brut Reserve Non Vintage - \$108.00

Jerome Blin comes from a family which has had a long history in Champagne in general and the Marne Valley specifically. Jerome's Grandfather was instrumental in the establishment of the H. Blin co-operative in the village of Vincelles in 1947. In recent years Jerome has struck out on his own and created his own label, Champagne Jerome

Blin. Following the principles of biodynamics, Jerome has successfully established a reputation for producing champagnes of elegance and with purity of flavour. A blend of Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay and it has a delicious delicacy and complexity for such a young non vintage. The bouquet has the aroma of freshly baked bread and the palate is creamy and fine with lovely persistence.

N.V. LECLERC-BRIANT Brut Reserve Non Vintage \$145.00

Cuvée Brut Reserve is pale gold in colour with flashing flecks of silver and myriad tiny bubbles swirling in the glass. The nose is as light and delicate as whipped cream with hawthorn and white pepper the first aromas to show, plus a pronounced chalky minerality. As the wine breathes other aromas are revealed: first, fresh butter, acacia honey and a slight nuance of peppermint; then a little later, come more evolved toasty notes together with liquorice, the saline notes of iodine and hints of poppies and buttercups. The palate is supple and fresh with a rich, creamy, almost buttery texture which caresses the tongue. All this is seamlessly married with soft acidity, minerality and, once again, a hint of peppermint. The finish is a cleanly chiselled harmony of creaminess woven with a touch of saltiness, minerality and aniseed.

2009 CHAMPANGE SAVART Dame De Coeur Cuvée de Prestige **\$215.00**

A prestige 100% Chardonnay delight, fully vinified in barrel with a straining intensity and class. Dense & concentrated, yet with a racy spine of acidity. Quite brilliant, but still young. In 2014/15 I'd recommend drinking in wine glasses to help it open up and shine.

2005 PIERRE PETERS Cuvée Speciale Les Chetillons Blanc de Blancs Cuvée de Prestige **\$195.00**

The vineyard of Les Chêtillons always produces a naturally rich wine, and the ripeness of a vintage like 2005 might not always seem to be the best combination. In fact, this handles the vintage superbly, showing an elevated richness yet emphasizing the sophisticated complexity and mineral expression of the site. Part of this is because the dosage of 4 g/l is perfectly judged, elongating the floral and citrus aromas and imparting a feeling of ripe fruit rather than sugar. The wine is now harmonious and expressive, such is its balance. It's a superb 2005, and while one might quibble with the opulent style of the vintage, there's no denying this wine's quality.

2009 VILMART Grand Cellier d'Or Vintage Wine **\$195.00**

Grand Cellier d'Or is blended from 80 percent chardonnay from the Rilly vineyard of Les Blanchés Voies and 20 percent pinot noir from Blanchés Voies and the nearby Basses Grèves. In the past this was always aged in barrique, but since 1998, Champs has preferred to put some base wines in 600-liter demi-muids, which he thinks can sometimes be more harmonious for this cuvée. "The small barriques give you a vanilla and toast character, but sharp, like a small child," he says. "The demi-muid is softer and rounder".

2007 DIEBOLT-VALLOIS Millesime Vintage **\$195.00**

A straw gold color, this Champagne charms with a comprehensive, harmonious and delicate flavor with hints of ripe fruit and muffins. It appears slim in the glass with further elegance and pure fragrance that seduces with fruity champagne typicity - the wine is surrounded by lighter shades of buns and bakery flavours. A very well poised Champagne with delicious curd, brioche and white flower edges. Truly delicious.

2008 Expression Extra Brut Vintage Wine **\$195.00**

Vintage 2008 is proving to live up to expectations and Vergnon doesn't disappoint. The poise and striking minerality associated with wines from Le Mesnil-sur-Oger, one of the great Grand Cru villages, is fully evident. Vergnon's style allows the pure, fresh citrus and agrumic flavours in this dry champagne to be broached in relative youth, especially with oysters, goats cheese salad or an interesting pairing with foie gras. Notwithstanding, there is the concentration for this to easily drink for at least another 5 years, unfurling more honeyed and toasty notes as it develops. It's a good looking wine in 2014/5 and will continue to look terrific over the next few years.

*"My dear girl, there are some things that just aren't done, such as drinking Dom Perignon '53 above the temperature of 38 degrees Fahrenheit."
- James Bond, 007*

GLOSSARY

NON VINTAGE

This is often the most simple, least complex & most common of all Champagne types. These wines account for about 80% of the wine most producers make in any given year. N.V. Champagne should always be easy to drink and generally should reflect the "house style". N.V. Champagnes are made by blending a series of reserve wines (back vintages) with the current harvest (usually in the majority). They are often only 2 or 3 years old & because of this they sometimes struggle to have the depth of flavour and roundness and balance as other Champagnes. To compensate for this, many houses often dose (add sugar) their wines at a higher level than they normally would, to give the impression that the wine is more generous than it actually is.

VINTAGE

Usually for a small step up in price there is a huge step up in quality. A vintage Champagne can only use the grapes from a single year's harvest. Meaning you get a true reflection of what that producer is capable of, given only the grapes from a single vintage. In theory Champagne producers will only produce a vintage wine if they believe the conditions of a particular year were favourable enough to produce a wine of excellent quality. The truth is that many producers simply cannot afford to wait for those conditions to naturally occur, so often, some fairly ordinary wines are released in the lesser years. With very few (notable) exceptions, virtually all Champagne producers and houses have been guilty of declaring a vintage, when clearly they shouldn't have. I personally believe that the "Vintage" wines on Champagne lists usually represent the best value. They are almost always a huge step up in quality over the N.V. wines and often that quality increase only comes at a small jump in price.

BLANC DE BLANCS

Literally meaning white of whites. These are the wines that are made without Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier grapes. They are made using 100% Chardonnay grapes. As a general rule Chardonnay adds elegance and style to a blend. So on its own you often get quite sophisticated and classy wines that usually develop slowly with distinct characters of toast and bakery aromas. Upon pouring, often there are strong aromas of white flowers, baked biscuits and apples flavours evolving in the glass. These wines are widely considered they longest lived and therefore often take an extra few years to develop to optimal drinkability.

DEMI SEC

Once upon a time all Champagnes were demi-secs. Before our tastes changed over a few centuries of evolution, virtually all Champagne was quite sweet. To this day the French still like their Champagne quite a bit sweeter than the English (the largest export market). Meaning "half sweet" the demi-sec wines range in sweetness from just a little bit sweet to quite sweet & cloying. Often the delicious cut and thrust of the naturally acidic Champagne grapes lose their uniqueness due to the addition of too much sugar, but there is definitely a market for this style. I have always described the style as the perfect breakfast wine.

ZERO DOSAGE

Just about all Champagnes are given dosage (liqueur de expidition) immediately prior to bottling. Usually this softens the acidity and rounds the flavour out to make it more appealing to the consumer. And of course it makes it a little sweeter. Zero Dosage wines are just that – wine do not get any dosage. There are only a handful of them and their makers usually make them in this way because they believe the quality of the fruit is so exceptional and pure, that it deserves to be seen without any embellishment. Often, due to the lack of dosage, these wines will take a few extra years to reach fruition as the lack of dosage inhibits evolution.

Tasted too young and these wines can taste tart and harsh.