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## Champagne Club! FALL 2016

Welcome to the latest edition of the Caveau Champagne Club – a twice-yearly tutored tasting and exploration of some of the most fascinating sparkling wines on earth – **Grower Champagnes**.

This club functions just like our **Burgundy Club** (*and if you're not already a member, call us at 503-679-6233 <http://www.caveauselections.com/burgundy-club/>*)

The wines in each 6-bottle shipment have been specifically selected to help educate and illustrate – each shipment is essentially a Champagne seminar-in-a-box. You can use all of this to stage your own tasting seminar at home, or of course you can just drink the wines one by one. Whichever path you choose – there's lots of good bubbly in your future!



**Slopes of Pinot Meunier in the Marne Valley**

## Blanc de Noirs

This shipment is a detailed study of **Blanc de Noirs** Champagnes, which are made from only red grapes (which in Champagne means **Pinot Noir** and **Pinot Meunier**, either together or separately.) The red grapes account for about 72% of the vineyard acreage in Champagne, and are grown pretty much throughout the region with the exception of the Côte des Blancs.

If you're new to the Club, or would like to brush up on how Champagne is made and what all those words on the labels mean, you'll find my **Champagne 101** tutorial on page 15, following our discussion of the wines in this shipment.

## Grower Champagne

We import exclusively, and this club features exclusively, **Grower Champagne**. Grower Champagnes are simply wines produced *100% from vineyards that are owned by the producer*. It may surprise you to learn that over 88% of Champagne is **Negociant Champagne** – meaning that the wines are made with grapes purchased from dozens to hundreds of different growers from throughout the region.

The big names that you are likely familiar with – Moët et Chandon, Veuve Clicquot, Mumm, Roederer, etc. – those are negociants. They produce millions of cases of wine, in an industrial fashion, from fruit grown mostly not by themselves, but by thousands of smaller growers across the 319 villages that make up the Champagne viticultural region.

Grower Champagnes, on the other hand, are made by small, family producers, growing grapes and making wines exclusively from their own vineyards. This is analogous to the small, family estates of Burgundy. The typical Grower Champagne producer makes fewer than 5,000 cases per year (in fact less than a dozen make more than 6,000 cases). There are nearly 5,000 of these small grower-producers in Champagne, *but fewer than 250 of them are available here in the U.S.!*

Most negociant Champagne is mass-produced, often over-priced, and can be quite lacking in character. (A very small portion of it however, is outstanding, and in fact can be among the best in all of Champagne.) Negociant Champagne is hugely successful, and is certainly the world's most celebrated wine.

Unfortunately, most of it just isn't very good. They produce 88% of the wine, but own only 12% of the vineyards. Their production methods are designed to bring the wines down to a lowest common denominator. Hence our motto – ***“Friends don't let friends drink negociant Champagne!”***

# Blanc de Noirs

Literally “**White from Blacks**”. All Champagne (except for the less than 5% of Champagne that is *Rosé*) is “white wine”, though most of it has a high percentage of red grapes in the blend. Some Champagnes are made from 100% red grapes, and those are designated as “**Blanc de Noirs**”. (Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and other red-wine grapes are often referred to as “black”, as at full maturity their skins turn from dark purple to black.)

The wine is **White**, even though the grapes are **Black**, because the juice inside a grape is clear (“white”) no matter what color the grape is. It is only from letting the juice macerate with the skins that grape juice takes on any color. In Champagne production, the juice is never in contact with the skins, hence all of the wine is White.

Blanc de Noirs Champagnes are most commonly based on **Pinot Noir**, either 100%, or with varying percentage of **Pinot Meunier** blended in. Historically Pinot Meunier was rarely used on its own, but in the last 10-15 years we’re seeing more and more examples of 100% Pinot Meunier bottlings – especially from the younger generation cutting-edge producers in the **Marne Valley**.

This has led to the discovery that Pinot Meunier, grown in the right place and made by the right hands, can indeed stand on its own and make compelling single-variety Champagne. We’ll explore a couple of these, as well as introduce you to something rarely seen in the US – still wine from Champagne, which is designated as **Coteaux Champenois**.



*The Chalk sub-soil of Champagne*

## Pinot Noir in Champagne

Pinot Noir is the most widely planted grape variety in Champagne, accounting for 37.5% of all vineyard acreage in the region. Prior to the mid 1700s Champagne was planted almost entirely to Pinot Noir, and the wines produced were still wines, not sparkling. They competed directly with the Pinot Noir-based wines from Burgundy. If a certain King preferred Burgundy, those wines were more in favor during his reign. The next monarch may have preferred the red wines from Champagne, making those wines more fashionable and in demand for a spell.

Because the Champagne region is much cooler than Burgundy (which is a cool site itself), the still red wines made from Pinot Noir in Champagne were fairly light-bodied and low in alcohol. The region is at the climatological limit for being able to grow grapes, and historically it has been rare for grapes in Champagne to ripen to the point where the wines would surpass 11% alcohol (in fact Champagne grapes are often harvested at 9-10% alcohol.) In Burgundy, typical ripeness would be in the 12-13.5% range, and 14-15% is now (sadly) the norm in California and often in Oregon as well.

There is a small amount of still wine being produced in Champagne today, and some of it is quite good. It is rarely seen in the US, as it is little understood, but you have an example of it to check out in this Club package. **Coteaux Champenois** (Koh-toh Chawn-pen-wah) is the designation for still wines from the region, and the best of them are prized by connoisseurs in Europe.

In sparkling wines, Pinot Noir brings body, depth, weight, and to the largest degree the intensity of flavor in Champagne. If Chardonnay is minerality and citrus, Pinot Noir is berry fruit and stone fruit, but with a minerality all its own. Pinot Noir is generally what brings power to Champagne, but the character and personality is of course dependent on where it was grown – the underlying *terroir*.



As we've discussed in previous packages, the Champagne establishment (i.e. the Négociants) have for centuries fed the world the misguided notion that there was no such thing as terroir in Champagne, that the wines were best when they were blends from hundreds of vineyards that were often a hundred miles apart. Of course we now know that this is hogwash. One can now taste two 100% Pinot Noir Champagnes from the same producer using the same methods, but from two different sites, and see the enormous differences terroir actually makes.

Pinot Noir is grown throughout the Champagne region with the exception of the Côte des Blancs, where there is essentially none. It is thought to perform at its best in some of the Grand Cru villages of the **Montagne de Reims**. Most notable of these are the villages of **Bouzy** and **Ambonnay**, widely considered to be the best of the best spots for Pinot Noir. Another hot spot for Pinot Noir is the Aube – the southernmost region of Champagne, where Pinot Noir is planted almost exclusively. It is significantly warmer in the Aube, with Pinot Noir more easily achieving better ripeness there. Many of today's top cult grower-producers are based in the Aube, and their wines are generally 100% Pinot Noir.

## Pinot Meunier in Champagne

It surprises most people that Pinot Meunier (moo-nyay) is the second most widely planted grape in Champagne, comprising some 35% of all vineyard acreage. It's a grape that many people haven't really heard of, or heard much about, mostly due to its primary role as a blending grape in Champagne, and that there is very little single-variety Pinot Meunier produced anywhere in the world.

Pinot Meunier (in Champagne they refer to it simply as "Meunier") thrives well in the frost-prone areas near the Marne river, and in other cold parts of the region, where it may be too cold to ripen Pinot Noir or Chardonnay. It is a genetic mutation and relative of Pinot Noir, but seems perfectly adapted for some specific conditions that exist in Champagne's extreme climate.



Most importantly, it is exceptionally frost-resistant, and thus is widely planted in the lower-lying areas along the river. There is also a pocket of Meunier excellence in a sub-section of the Montagne de Reims known as the “Petite Montagne” – notably in the villages of Jouy-lès-Reims and Pargny-lès-Reims. With the exception of the Côte des Blancs and the Aube, Meunier is planted just about everywhere throughout Champagne. It historically has been the most-planted grape in the Marne Valley, but again is found in most other reaches of the region.

Its purpose in life has always been thought to be a great blending grape for Champagne. **It brings lovely floral and herbal aromatics to the blends, as well as a creamy texture-richness to the mid-palate.** These attributes make it a lovely complement to the fruit and power of Pinot Noir and the limestone minerality and crisp apple expressions of Chardonnay. The knock against Meunier has been that wines made from it “don’t age well” or are not “interesting enough” on their own, though the cutting-edge producers are proving these maxims wrong on a daily basis. A “classic” Champagne formula calls for one-third of each grape variety, and many producers continue to rely on this blend for their basic non-vintage Brut.

## The Wines

Now with our basic info in hand, we can explore six different wines from Champagne, all of which are made exclusively from Pinot Noir or Pinot Meunier – the opposite end of the spectrum from last Spring’s package, which was 100% Chardonnay Champagnes.

The wines in this package are all technically “Blanc de Noirs” wines, though many do not say so on the label. Labeling information is getting better and better in Champagne, but a lot of the labels continue to leave out what should be vital information – the grapes used, base vintage, date of disgorgement, dosage level, etc. I’m on a mission for full transparency in Champagne labeling, and things are definitely moving in the right direction. For centuries the Négociants did not want you to know what was in the bottle, as they claimed it didn’t matter! Today’s consumer knows better, and is demanding more information, and things are indeed improving.

## 1. **Cuvée Heritage Paul Forget** – Forget-Chemin

**CLUB PRICE \$38**

4th-generation vigneron Thierry Forget (Fore-zhay) has a total of 30 acres of vines, spread across 60 parcels in 11 different villages. Pinot Meunier makes up 70% of his total acreage, despite his holdings being mostly on the Montagne de Reims, which is mostly considered a Pinot Noir stronghold. 80-90% of his annual production goes into his basic NV Brut, and the other 10-20% he says he “plays around with, to amuse myself and try to make some interesting wines with strong character and personality.”

Cuvée Paul Forget is named for his grandfather, as well as his son, and is Thierry’s “blank slate” bottling every year. He has no preconceived notions of what it will be. He tastes through the cellar and puts together a blend that he thinks will be “not only of exceptional quality, but have the distinct and unique voice of the vintage.” Some years it’s a single variety wine, sometimes a blend. It’s never the same twice, and certainly never dull or boring.

- 100% from the 2013 harvest
- 100% Pinot Noir from the village of Ludes on the Montagne de Reims
- Primary fermentation in tank
- Average vine age 35+
- Clay and limestone soils over solid chalk sub-soil
- Dosage 8g/l - Disgorged March 2016
- 185 cases produced

We’re starting off with a great example of Montagne de Reims Pinot Noir. It’s noticeably ripe and rich, which was a difficult achievement in the 2013 vintage. Thierry’s wines always slant toward the ethereal and elegant end of the spectrum, showing some pretty aromatics to go with the hints of berry fruits on the palate.



***Thierry Forget in his cellar in Ludes***

## 2. **2009 Millésime** – Champagne Pierre Brigandat

**CLUB PRICE \$40**

Now we move down to the Aube, the region that's about a two hour drive south of the traditional Reims-Épernay axis. Brigandat (Bree-gawn-dah) is as far south as you can go and still be in the Champagne appellation – theirs is the very last vineyard in Champagne before one reaches Chablis (just a few kilometers away).

In this part of Champagne the vineyards are on a bedrock of Kimmeridgian limestone, the same soils found in Chablis, so there is a unique mineral expression that shows up in the Pinot Noir grown here. (Again, the Aube is essentially all Pinot Noir.)

Bertrand Brigandat took over the 17-acre estate from his father Pierre in 2001, and is quietly making some of the prettiest wines in the region. His mantra is « Peace and Love », meaning he's looking to make harmonious wines that are in balance, with rounded corners and no jagged edges.

- All from estate parcels on south-facing slopes in Channes
- From the warm and ripe 2009 vintage
- Primary fermentation in enamel-lined steel tanks
- 5 grams dosage – making this technically an Extra-Brut
- Disgorged October 2015
- Only 175 cases produced

An excellent example of Pinot Noir grown in a warm spot on very mineral soil – deep fruit richness coupled with minerality in a very elegant, pretty package. Floral on the nose, suave and sophisticated on the palate. Yes, please!



***Bertrand Brigandat***



### 3. **2009 Millésime** – Jérôme Coessens

**CLUB PRICE \$58**

All 5 of the wines Coessens (koh-sawnz) produces come from his lone 5-acre vineyard, one grape (Pinot Noir), and one vintage. He's a terroir purist in the purest sense. Even though all of his wines are from a single vintage, he only puts the year on the label of this one (Millésime means "vintage year"), and he only designates a vintage-dated wine in years where he feels the quality is exceptional.

Based in the tiny village of Ville-sur-Arce in the Aube, Coessens is just minutes away from Brigandat, and their vineyards are on the same base of Kimmeridgian limestone. There is a significant difference in terroir at l'Argillier (the name of Coessens' vineyard) however – it has an unusually high percentage of clay in the soil, which imbues the wine with much more power and structure. There is an extra level of intensity, and more palate weight – it's a bigger, more muscular expression of Pinot Noir, but with the same fruit profile and underlying minerality.

Within his 5-acre site he's identified sections that emphasize fruit, florality, richness, and structure. The Millésime selection is from the fruit and structure parcels.

- Based on the warm & ripe 2009 vintage
- Fermented in stainless steel tank
- Disgorged December 2015 – a full 6 years in the lees
- Dosage – 9 g/l
- 150 cases produced

This is not a shy Champagne, nor one to be sipped casually as an apéritif. It almost demands food to go with it – I love it with roast chicken and wild mushrooms, or a simply grilled veal chop. Yum!



*Jérôme Coessens, in his l'Argillier Vineyard*

The first three wines were all 100% Pinot Noir, and now we'll switch to **Pinot Meunier**.

***What is fascinating about these next three is that they are all made from the same grapes from the same vineyards by the same producer – but are distinctly and dramatically different expressions*** (and one of them doesn't have any bubbles!)

#### 4. **Les Vignes d'Autrefois** – Laherte Frères

**CLUB PRICE \$60**

7th-generation vigneron **Aurélien Laherte** (lah-airt) is now firmly in charge at the family estate, which dates to 1889. He farms Biodynamically, and is squarely on the cutting edge of new-school Champagne – i.e. Champagne that clearly shows where it was grown, without make-up or artifice of any kind. He now has a total of 25 acres of vines spread over 10 villages and some 70+ small parcels. The bulk of the holdings are in the home village of Chavot, a key site in the sub-region of the Marne Valley known as the “Coteaux Sud d'Épernay” (which simply means the hillside slopes south of Épernay.) This sector is reputed to be an exceptional site for Pinot Meunier, as it ripens very well here.

Laherte is blessed with a number of old-vine parcels, including two planted in 1947 and 1953, which make up this cuvée (and the next two as well!) There are very few plantings of Pinot Meunier of this age still around. Located in Chavot and nearby Mancy, some of these vines are planted un-grafted, on their own roots, and most are selections propagated from old family parcels from the early 1900s (hence the name **Vignes d'Autrefois** – “vines from a time gone by”.) These wines are a tribute to Aurélien's ancestors and to Pinot Meunier itself.

Laherte takes these grapes and makes three different wines with them – a “White” Champagne, a Rosé Champagne, and a still wine “Coteaux Champenois”. Truly fascinating stuff! We'll start with the White bubbly...

- 100% from the 2011 vintage
- Fermented in used Burgundy barrels, minimum 4 years old
- Malolactic fermentation was blocked
- Aged for 6 months in barrel post-fermentation, with occasional stirring
- 3 years on the lees in bottle
- Extra-Brut - Dosage 2 g/l – Disgorged September 2015
- 150 cases produced

This wine makes it very clear that Pinot Meunier is certainly capable of standing alone and making superior Champagne. Wow! A stunning nose of white flowers and fresh aromatic herbs, a rich and mouth-filling palate, and distinct mineral notes make it a complete package. The length is extraordinary, as is the depth and complexity of flavors.



*Aurélien Laherte at the winery in Chavot*

**5. Rosé de Meunier** – Laherte Frères

**CLUB PRICE \$38**

From the same old-vine Pinot Meunier, with the addition of some Meunier from younger sites as well. The chief difference is that for this wine, the grapes were left to sit with the skins for about 12-hours prior to fermentation, letting some of the color leech into the juice.

Of course not only color gets extracted during this brief maceration period – fruit flavors and structural elements that live only in the skins come out to play as well. The result is a nose and palate of fresh wild strawberries and wildflowers, and some added backbone to the texture

- Same fermentation and ageing regimen as the previous wine
- Dosage 3 g/l – Disgorged November 2015
- 300 cases produced

A very pretty and appealing Rosé, brimming with fruit and flowers and true Meunier character. God, I love this wine!



## 6. **La Troisième Vie** - Laherte Frères

**CLUB PRICE \$48**

This is what happens when you take some of those same old-vine Pinot Meunier grapes and ferment them **with the skins** – i.e. the standard protocol for making still **red** wine. No second fermentation in bottle, thus no bubbles. The flavors, aromatics and structure are entirely different. All of the color, tannins, and many layers of flavor are contained in the skins – and those are things that never show up in Champagne, which is made without any skin contact. Now we get to see what happens when you make a red wine from these grapes – and it's a beautiful thing !

**Coteaux Champenois** is the appellation for still wines made in Champagne, and we rarely see them here in the US – most of them stay in France and very few are exported anywhere. Rarer still is a Coteaux Champenois made from Pinot Meunier – the vast majority are Pinot Noir based (and there is a miniscule amount of White Coteaux Champenois made from Chardonnay, though you're not likely to ever see one.)

**La Troisième Vie** means « The Third Life ». The first life for these grapes was as a White Champagne, the second was the Rosé Champagne, and now the third incarnation is a still wine.

- Aged and fermented entirely in used Burgundy barrels
- Élevage in barrel for 10 months
- Bottled in August 2012
- 75 cases produced

Not only are you not likely to run into many examples of Coteaux Champenois, you'll rarely find one this delicious ! Tasted blind one could think it was a village-level Volnay, or perhaps a red Chassagne-Montrachet? Who knew it could get this good ? Rich and mouth-filling, long and luxurious, with hallmark Meunier floral top notes, this is simply gorgeous. Enjoy your bottle – you're not likely to see another one for a long time !



# Next shipment in the Spring...

Thanks for joining us on our exploration of the great wines of Champagne! Watch your email for information on our next Caveau Champagne Club shipment coming in the Spring, and for pre-arrival offerings on all the yummy Bubbles headed your way throughout the year. All the latest information is always available on our website: [www.caveauselections.com](http://www.caveauselections.com)

Please let us know if we need to make any changes to your account. Email us at [hellocaveau@gmail.com](mailto:hellocaveau@gmail.com) or call us at 503-628-9857 if:

- You have a new or updated credit card
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- You have any questions about your Club membership

*Launched in 2005, **Caveau Selections** is owned and operated by Martha & Scott Wright, the founders and former owners of top Oregon Pinot Noir producer Scott Paul Wines. Scott has been drinking and studying the wines and regions of Burgundy and Champagne since the 1970s, and visiting regularly since the 1980s. He leads annual Insiders' Tours of both Burgundy and Champagne, and teaches seminars here and abroad. He is available to teach private seminars and conduct tutored tastings for your group – email [Scott@caveauselections.com](mailto:Scott@caveauselections.com) for more information.*

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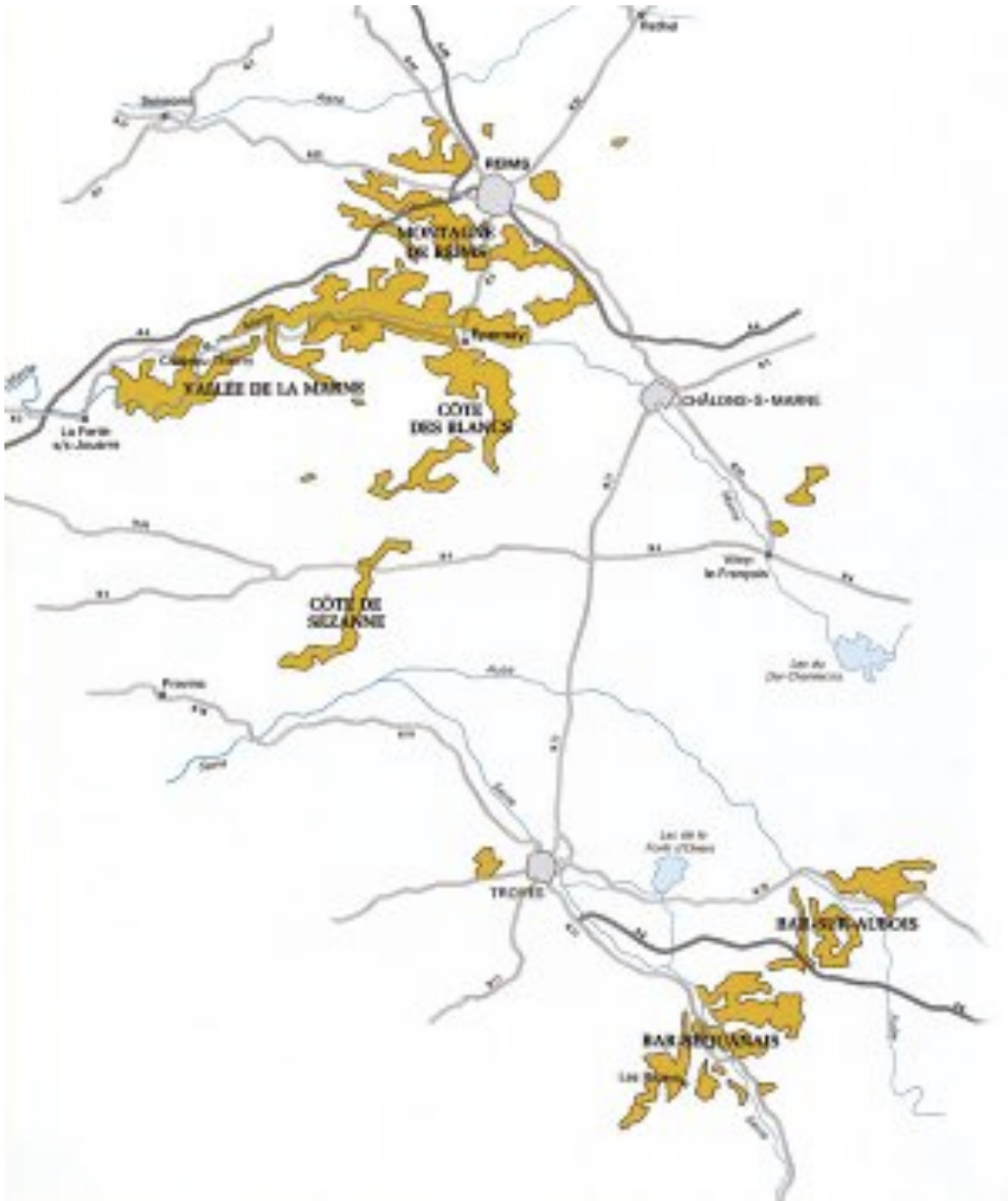
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**Read on for our complete Champagne 101 tutorial on the following pages...**

# Champagne 101

- Champagne is the largest AOC (**A**ppellation d'**O**rigine **C**ontrôlée) in France. It covers a whopping 76,000 acres of vineyards, across 319 small villages and towns. Only wine made from this delimited area can be called Champagne. Sparkling wine made from other regions in France carries the appellation *Crémant*.
- There are nearly 20,000 vineyard owners in Champagne. Only about 5,000 of them produce wine from the grapes they grow. The other 15,000 sell all of their grapes to the large negociant houses.
- There are five distinct sub-regions of Champagne:
- **Montagne de Reims** – Encompasses several villages surrounding the city of Reims (pronounced “Rance”). Pinot Noir is the predominant grape grown here, but there is significant Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier as well.
- **Vallée de la Marne** – Many villages strung along the Marne river, which cuts across Champagne from East to West. The largest percentage of acreage is planted to Pinot Meunier.
- **Côte des Blancs** – As the name suggests, this is white grape territory. Virtually everything in this sub-region is Chardonnay.
- **Côte de Sezanne** – A region on the rise. All three grapes are grown here.
- **The Aube (or the Côte des Bar)** – An area on the rise, with a new generation of quality-focused growers emerging. This is where much of the most exciting, cutting-edge Champagne is coming from. The first three regions listed above account for the vast majority of Champagne production, though the Côte de Sezanne and the Aube are growing rapidly.

Below is a map with a good overview of the entirety of the Champagne appellation.



- **Vineyard classification** is radically different in Champagne than in Burgundy. In Burgundy, it is each individual piece of vineyard land that is classified. In Champagne, the *entire village* is classified – every vineyard within the boundaries of a village is given the same classification (though in fact certain sites within the village are clearly better than others, so this is a seriously imperfect system).



- Each village is given a numerical rating, on a scale of 100 percentage points. Champagne village ratings are as follows:
- **Grand Cru** – Villages rated 100%
- **Premier Cru** – Villages rated 90-99%
- **Deuxième Cru** - Villages rated 80-89%

There are only 17 Grand Cru villages. The most familiar names among them would be *Bouzy*, *Ambonnay*, *Oger*, and *le Mesnil-sur-Oger*.

The percentage points refer to the price paid for grapes from each village by the negociants. Say the top-line price for a ton of Pinot Noir is set at \$4,000 for this vintage. If you were selling grapes from a vineyard in a Grand Cru village, you would receive 100% of that price, the full \$4,000. If you were selling grapes from a Premier Cru village rated at 95%, you would receive 95% of the top price, or \$3,800 in this case.

There are three main grape varieties grown in Champagne:

**Pinot Noir** – which accounts for 37.5% of all plantings

**Chardonnay** – which accounts for 27.5%

**Pinot Meunier** – which accounts for 35%

- Additionally, there are four “other” grapes allowed in Champagne, but they are rarely seen today. They are – *Fromenteau*, *Petit Meslier*, *Arbanne*, and *Pinot Blanc*
- Pinot Meunier is a grape little seen outside of Champagne. It is extremely valuable as a blending grape, and adds lovely aromatics and light-bodied fruit to the wines, but is not often used on its own, neither in Champagne nor in still wine.
- Most Champagne is a blend of two or more of the varieties, though some are made from only one of the grape varieties.
- There are four main categories of wine in Champagne –
  - **“Champagne”** – made from a blend of two or three of the grape varieties, using both colors – i.e. Chardonnay and at least one of the two Pinot varieties

- “**Blanc de Blancs**” – made exclusively from white grapes – i.e. 100% Chardonnay
- “**Blanc de Noirs**” – made exclusively from the red (also known as “black”) grapes, either singly or a combination of the two.
- “**Rosé**” – made from any combination of two or three of the varieties. The pink color is obtained either by blending in a portion of red still-wine, or by letting a portion of the juice macerate with the skins of red grapes.
- But it’s all “white”! Yes, it is. It’s import to remember that the juice from all wine grapes is clear – it is only if you let the skins soak together with the juice that one gets any color from the “red” wine grapes. For Champagne, the Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier grapes are treated just like the Chardonnay, in that the juice is pressed out immediately, and the juice is never in contact with the skins. Hence, “white” wine from red grapes.
- In addition to the four main categories of Champagne listed above, there is another classification based on the amount of residual sugar in the wine. (We’ll explain in detail later the mechanics of this. For now just know that at the end of the winemaking process, varying amounts of sugar are added to most Champagnes.)
- The Seven Levels of Sweetness (or **Dryness**, as the case may be):
- **Brut Nature** (Also known as Brut Zero, Ultra Brut, Brut Sauvage) – less than 3 grams per liter
- **Extra Brut** – Less than 6 grams/liter
- **Brut** – Less than 12 grams/liter
- **Extra-sec** – 12-20 grams/liter
- **Sec** – 17-35 grams/liter
- **Demi-sec** – 33-50 grams/liter
- **Doux** – 50+ grams/liter

In addition to all of the above classifications and categories, Champagnes also fall into one of the two following designations –

**VINTAGE** – A vintage Champagne is primarily, and sometimes entirely, from grapes grown in only one year. The appellation laws require a vintage-dated wine to be a minimum of 85% from the stated vintage – the other 15% can be from one or more other vintages. A producer may produce a vintage wine from whatever vintages he or she wishes – though most will not make vintage wine in the lesser quality years. It is up to the individual producer to decide whether a vintage wine will be produced in a given year. Vintage wines must age a minimum of three years prior to release. Only 10-15% of all Champagne is vintage-dated.

**NON-VINTAGE** – 85-90% of all Champagne is non-vintage, meaning that the wine is a blend from grapes grown in two or more years. It is often said that the essence of non-vintage Champagne is the art of blending – using many different components and building blocks to arrive at a consistent flavor profile and character (or lack thereof).

## History

Before we dive into the winemaking process, let's take a look at a little history.

- Champagne hasn't always been a sparkling wine! Until the late 1600s, Champagne was exclusively a still red wine, made from the Pinot Noir grape. (Thus making Champagne a major competitor to Burgundy. The two regions were in fact bitter enemies throughout the centuries.)
- *Dom Perignon*, the monk widely credited for "inventing" Champagne (and now a brand-name used by Moët et Chandon for their luxury brand), was actually charged with the mission to "stop the bubbles" from happening in the wines! He was the cellar master at the Abbey of Hautvillers in the late 1600s, when the monks grew tired of losing 15-25% of their wines every year to unwanted fermentations that were occurring in the bottle. (The bottles were literally exploding in the cellars.) Instead of "stopping" the bubbles, Dom Perignon figured out how to control the process. His biggest contributions were coming up with the use of corks to close the bottles, which replaced the hemp-rag shoved into the bottle neck with a plug of wood, and he championed the art of blending – different grapes and villages, to make the most harmonious cuvée.

## Méthode Champenois

The *Méthode Champenois* is the intricate, expensive, time-intensive and labor intensive process by which all Champagne is made. There are of course many others ways to make sparkling wine – but none of them produce results with anywhere near the quality of this method. It was arrived at by trial and error, like all winemaking practices over the centuries. The main point of difference from any other method is that wine produced this way *undergoes a second alcoholic*

*fermentation in the bottle* – thus each bottle is its own unique fermentation vessel. Here's a step-by-step look at the process...

All grapes are harvested by hand – picking machines are not allowed. The grapes are pressed as soon as possible after picking. The press is filled with whole bunches of grapes, and the clear juice is pressed out directly into tanks

The juice from the first pressing, the best quality juice, is in Champagne lingo called the *Cuvée*. Most grower Champagnes use only this top quality juice. Lesser quality juice from the 2nd pressing is called the *Taille*, and is often used by the large negociants in their mass-market bottlings. A third pressing produces an even lower quality juice that is called the *2ème Taille* – and is only used in the French equivalent of André's Cold Duck.

**Débourbage.** The juice is chilled to about 38 degrees, and allowed to settle for a day or two, in order to clarify the juice and to separate the juice from any solids

The clear juice is then transferred into temperature controlled tanks for fermentation. Most grower Champagne is allowed to ferment using only the wild, indigenous yeasts, while most negociant Champagne is inoculated with cultured, commercial yeast. A cool fermentation (at 65-68 degrees) ensues, lasting 3-10 days. (A very tiny amount of Champagne is fermented in oak barrels – only a small percentage of producers employ this technique.)

Champagne grapes at harvest rarely exceed 10-11% potential alcohol due to the extremely cool climate in which they're grown. If the grapes were harvested at lower potential alcohol levels, the producer may chaptalize – add sugar to the juice during fermentation – to bring the alcohol level up to 10.5-11% when fermentation completes.

After the primary alcoholic fermentation, malolactic fermentation is allowed to happen in most cases. Malolactic fermentation is a naturally occurring process that converts the sharp, crisp malic acid – the acid that's in apples, into the softer lactic acid – the acid that's in milk. Some producers choose to block the malolactic fermentation, preferring to keep their wines higher in acidity.

When the malolactic fermentation is complete, you then have a very acidic and not so pleasant tasting base wine, called the ***Vin Clair***. At this stage it tastes green, harsh, and fairly astringent. It is hard to believe that it will one day be transformed into the delightful beauty that we know as Champagne!

Next comes the ***assemblage*** – the blending of different *Vins Clairs*, selecting how much Chardonnay, or Pinot Noir, or Pinot Meunier to use in the blend (the different grapes are pressed and fermented separately), how much wine from this vintage, how much from previous vintages, etc.

Then the final blend is put into bottles. A calculation is made as to how much sugar needs to be added to bring the alcohol level to approx. 12% after the next fermentation.

Now the **Liqueur de Tirage** is added to the bottled wine. This is a blend of sugar, yeast, and wine. The bottle is closed with a crown cap – like on a bottle of beer or Coke. The bottles are then laid on their sides – **sur lattes** – in a cool (50-55F) cellar, and the second fermentation occurs in the bottle – a process that is simply the yeasts eating the sugar, which produces CO<sub>2</sub> and alcohol. This second fermentation, called the **Prise de Mousse**, will take about three months. The alcohol level will rise to about 12% after this fermentation.



**Stacking the bottles sur-lattes for fermentation**

When the second fermentation is finished, a sticky sludge of dead yeast cells will have dropped out of the liquid and attached itself to the walls of the bottle.

The process called **Rémouage**, or Riddling is next – slowly and methodically turning the bottles several times per day and tilting them at increasing angles, so eventually the bottles are fully upside down, and all of the yeast sediment has moved and settled onto the inside of the crown cap. Done by hand, this process

takes 8-12 weeks. Mechanical gyro- palletes can now do the riddling in about 7 days – and most negociants do all of their riddling mechanically these days. Many growers still do it by hand, or at the very least for their top of the line bottlings and all of their magnums and large formats.



**Riddling by hand**



Riddling by gyro-palette



Dead yeast in the bottle neck near the end of remouage

Once the yeast sediment has finally all moved onto the cap, the bottles are stored on their heads – *sur pointes* – and aged for a minimum of 12 more months for non-vintage Champagne, or about 30 months minimum for the vintage stuff.

The producers may choose to age their wines much longer than the minimum. The longer the wine ages on its lees – the yeast sediment – the more richness and flavor development will occur. Some top bottlings are aged 10+ years before release. When the decision has been made to release the wine, first the yeasty sludge needs to be removed from the bottle. But how do you do that?

It's an ingenious process called *Dégorgement* – or Disgorging. The bottles are placed neck-down for just a minute or so into a solution of freezing brine. This freezes the yeast sediment along with the first inch or so of liquid in the neck. And turns it into a firm, slushy pellet.



**The frozen pellet, just prior to disgorging**



Then the crown cap is removed. And the slushy pellet (along with a few drops of wine) is forced out of the bottle by the pressure of the CO2 gas in the wine.

Then, immediately after the ejection of the pellet, the **Liqueur d'Expédition** is added – otherwise known as the **Dosage**. This is the slurry of Brandy or wine and Cane Sugar that determines the level of sweetness in the Champagne – as detailed above in the Seven Levels of Sweetness.

And finally the Champagne is corked, the wire cage is applied to make sure the cork stays in, and the bottle is foiled, labeled, boxed, and readied for shipment.

The disgorging, addition of the Liqueur d'Expédition, and the corking-foiling-labeling process is all done at the same time on an automated line, ensuring consistency from bottle to bottle. (Consistency used to be a huge problem in the past, when all of these processes were carried out by hand, a practice that continued until the 1970s.)

The finished product is a bottle that contains between 40 million and 250 million bubbles – the product of all the CO2 gas trapped in the wine from the in-bottle fermentation. When the cork is popped, the bubbles are released (and the party has begun)!

Other than that, it's a pretty simple process!