

Champagne Club

FALL 2019



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, you can sign-up on the website). Also, check-out our new **"House Wine" Clubs** if you're interested in a regular supply of yummy Burgundy at around \$20 per bottle!

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.

For this package, we've selected **three top grower-producers** and chosen **two different wines from each**, for a great 6-pack that helps explain the evolution of the dynamic world of Grower Champagne. Let's pop some corks!





map courtesy of The Office of Champagne USA
www.champagne.us

Evolution, Revolution

Champagne has changed dramatically in the last 20 years. For 250+ years the region was dominated by a handful of large negotiant brands - the “Luxury Houses” that most people know: Moët, Clicquot, Krug, Dom Perignon, Mumm, Heidseck, Perrier-Jouët, Bollinger, etc. These houses buy the vast majority of their grapes from hundreds of small family farms across the region, and blend them to make their wines.

Then, in the 1990s, many of the small growers started keeping some (or all) of their grapes to make wine under their own labels, and the modern era of Grower-Champagne was born. There have always been a handful of Grower-producers over time, but it didn’t become a “movement” until some 20-25 years ago. The big houses and cooperatives still dominate the region - but their share of the market has dropped from nearly 99% of all bottles to sold to about 80% today - representing a difference of some 57 MILLION bottles per year.

The first wave started taking the wines in a new direction, but stayed fairly loyal to the tried and true styles and methods of “Classic” Champagne. These guys became what I call the “**Modern Classics**”. They were followed by a new and larger group with a more rebellious nature and an appetite for forging new paths - a stellar bunch of vigneron who became the “**New School**” of Grower-producers. Then came what we now call Champagne’s “**Third Wave**” - the boundary pushers and mavericks who excitedly took Champagne in unforeseen and exciting new directions.

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 our **Champagne 101 tutorial** on our website under “**Champagne Club**”.



Grower Champagne

We import exclusively, and this club features, 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 Négociant Champagne – meaning that the wines are made with grapes purchased from dozens to hundreds of different growers from throughout the region, and produced in huge factories.

The big names that you are likely familiar with – Moët et Chandon, Veuve Clicquot, Mumm, Taittinger, etc. – those are négociants. 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 over 6,500 of these small grower-producers in Champagne, but fewer than 300 of them are available here in the U.S.

Grower Vs Négociant Champagne

Yes, I am passionately pro Grower Champagne - but only the good ones. Not all “Farmer Fizz” is good - the vast majority of it just isn't. In fact the worst quality Champagne you're likely to ever encounter is probably a lower-echelon Grower bottling - some of which are downright awful. Conversely, not all Négociant Champagne is bad - some of it is flat-out marvelous. Krug, Salon, Bollinger, Roederer, Jacquesson and many others are négociants who produce some of the finest wines on the planet. Clicquot, Moët, and many of the other “big names”, however, do not.

As production volume increases it just gets so much harder to maintain a level of quality. Equally as important - a larger production volume makes it more difficult to produce wines with personality or character, and nearly impossible to make a wine that speaks of a sense of place (especially when the grapes are coming from several hundred different places!) That's why I love and applaud the top larger producers who are making gloriously delicious wines. At the end of the day - great, average, and poor producers come in all sizes. We specialize in the great smaller producers, who we think are making some of the most exciting wines to be found anywhere.

The Modern Classics

It was not a widespread practice in Champagne to make wine from the grapes you grew on the family farm - nearly all of the nearly 20,000 small growers sold their grapes to the big houses. There have always been a few, however, and we started seeing some here and there in the 60s and 70s. These growers generally continued to sell most of their fruit to the negociants, but kept a portion of their production - typically the “best” part, to try their hand at making and selling wine on their own. It’s not an easy proposition - making Champagne requires a large investment in expensive equipment, is very labor-intensive, and requires one to hold wines for a relatively long time before they can legally be put on the market. The profit is potentially ultimately greater, but it’s hard to forego the immediate cash payments for the grapes from the negociants. It was a serious leap of faith that the early growers took when they decided to start making wine.

Most of the early adopters stayed on the established path in terms of wine styles and production methods. They weren’t out to break new ground necessarily, but rather to show what they could do on their own and start to develop a local following for their new brand. One of the earlier examples is **Champagne Forget-Chemin** in the village of Ludes on the Montagne de Reims. Owner-winemaker Thierry Forget is the 4th generation to head the family estate. His grandfather was a very early adopter, selling about 30% of his production in bottles back in the 50s and 60s, when that was a decidedly uncommon practice. His father then ramped up to bottling about 70% in the late 60s, and now under Thierry’s watch since 1991 they bottle virtually the entirety of what they produce from their 30 acres of vines, selling only an acre or two to Veuve Clicquot.

The winemaking style at Forget-Chemin hasn’t changed much over the generations. The most significant differences have been in a gradual **lowering of the dosage levels over the years**, and a dramatic move to sustainable and organic farming methods in the vineyards. Prior to the 1970s, virtually every grower in Champagne was using a lot of nasty chemicals, pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers - and sadly most of them still are. Healthier vineyard practices are indeed the single biggest change in Champagne over the last 50 years, but they still have a long, long way to go. Champagne as a whole remains one of the worst offenders, where much of the magnificent terroir has been “nuked” into submission by decades of chemical bombardment.



Forget-Chemin

Forget-Chemin is one of a growing group of Champagne growers certified to the French HVE standards (**H**autes **V**aleurs **E**nvironnemental) - essentially a set of rules aimed at promoting low-impact sustainable farming at a rigorous level. Just a generation ago, this would have been unthinkable in Champagne - it was huge step forward when Thierry and some like-minded colleagues took those steps in the 90s and 2000s.

Perhaps the boldest move they made was being one of the earliest members of “**Club Trésors du Champagne**” - better known as “**Special Club**”. Founded in 1971, it’s a group of 25 of Champagne’s top small growers, who’ve banded together to form what is now a recognized “brand”, or mark of quality, for top-end grower Champagne.

The concept is simple - each member can submit a wine they’ve produced for review to the entire membership, if and when they think they have made something of exceptional quality. It must be 100% from the grower’s own vineyards, and must represent the best of what the grower is capable of producing. If the membership unanimously agrees that the wine is worthy of Special Club designation, the base wine can then be bottled in the uniquely shaped custom Special Club bottle for the next fermentation and several years of aging, and then must be reviewed and approved again by the group before being released to the market. We’re thrilled to be able to include the latest Forget-Chemin Special Club bottling in this package.



1. Champagne Forget-Chemin - “Marie Forget Extra-Brut”

\$36

Named for Thierry’s daughter, the **Marie Forget** bottling is a new addition to the estate’s lineup, and one we’re very excited about. It brings together all three primary Champagne grapes (Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier) in roughly equal proportions, from Thierry’s estate vineyards in 5 different villages across the Montagne de Reims. You can’t buy this wine at the winery or find it in shops or restaurants in France - he makes it only for specialty importers like us. The goal is to produce a very feminine, graceful Champagne - and we think this one’s a massive success. The extraordinary level of older reserve wines in the blend make this especially unique and very appealing - we only wish he made more of it!

- Based on the 2015 harvest, but fully 70% of the blend is made up of the estate’s reserve wines, consisting of every vintage back to 2001!
- Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Meunier from the villages of Ludes, Maily, Chigny-les-Roses, Verzenay and Taissy
- Dosage 5.5 g/l
- Disgorged May 2019

Thierry actually makes two versions of this wine, one a Brut with a dosage of 8-9 grams, and this Extra-Brut version at 5.5. Tasted side-by-side they are dramatically different, but both lovely in their own way. We prefer the Extra-Brut, which really brings out the elegance, finesse, grace, and ethereal qualities of the wine. It’s a truly fine, distinctly feminine wine - like a lovely young dancer in the prime of her natural, youthful beauty. Here’s Thierry and daughter Marie...



2. Champagne Forget-Chemin - “Special Club 2013” \$55

If you’ve been in our Caveau Champagne club for a while, you’ve seen previous vintages of the Forget-Chemin Special Club bottling. This ’13 is a stunner - Thierry has really been coming into his own in the last 5-7 years and the wines are going from strength to strength. Every time he makes a Special Club wine it is quite different from previous versions. Not only do the variations of the vintage come into play, but also the large palette he has to work with with, having some 60 different vineyard parcels in 12 different villages. He simply picks what he thinks are the most outstanding base wines of the year, and tries them in a multitude of blends until he hits what he feels is the sweet-spot that showcases the best of the vintage. Sometimes it’s a wine of brooding power, sometimes it’s more of a delicate flower (and in 2014 there will be a limited production Special Club Rosé!) This one seems to hit both ends of the spectrum, and is quite simply one of my favorite Special Club wines ever.

- 62% Pinot Noir (half from Ludes, half from Mailly), 38% Chardonnay
- Over 5 years on the lees, disgorged April 2019
- Dosage 8g/l

It’s a bit discreet upon opening, and then the nose develops after 5-10 minutes in the glass. A bouquet that hints at white flowers flows into intense and precise flavors mid-palate. Imagine intense power that is elegantly displayed - that is the lightning he’s captured in this bottle. It starts with a very elegant, refined texture of micro-bubbles, then pure flavors of lemon-lime and grapefruit dominate the palate, culminating in a persistent and powerful finish that distinguish this wine as one of absolute class and breeding. A true “Wow” wine in every sense of the word.



The New School

If the early Grower-producers didn't stray too far off the beaten path, the next wave clearly took the proverbial fork in the road. Instead of forging ahead, they went left - exploring roads that were perhaps on the map but few had yet gone down them to see where they went.

This was perhaps easier to do in the Aube, Champagne's southernmost reaches, where the growers basically had nothing to lose. Always considered a poor step-child of Champagne, the Aube had to fight to be included in the official Champagne appellation in the early 1900s (the big boys in Reims and Epernay did not want the Aube included, period.) The southerners won that battle, though they were unable to get any of their villages classified at the prestigious Grand Cru or Premier Cru levels. Thus they could never command top prices for their grapes - even though the quality had proven to be quite excellent and on par with many of the more exalted northern villages.

Champagne was on the front lines of fighting in WWII, and many of the vineyards were destroyed during the war. The war ended and the vineyards began to be replanted in 1944-45, but the acreage in the Aube didn't start to get replanted until the mid-late 1960s, as the grapes from up north were considered more valuable and more vital. So once again the Aube was one huge step behind the rest of Champagne. As acreage in grape production slowly returned, the growers there essentially sold all of their grapes to the negociants up north, but at lower prices, and most were barely making a living.

When the Grower Champagne "thing" started happening in the 90s, the folks in the Aube took notice. The idea of producing and bottling and selling your own wines looked pretty attractive. There was an upside if it worked, and they couldn't have done much worse if they stayed with the status quo. This is a main reason why many of the 2nd wave of Grower-producers emerged from the Aube - *Vouette et Sorbée* and *Cedric Bouchard* being prominent examples.



Champagne Pierre Brigandat

Champagne Pierre Brigandat came into being when Pierre, a banker in the region who also owned a farm that grew wheat and other grains, and raised livestock, planted some grapes in 1965 on the south-facing hillsides of his land in the village of Channes, a tiny hamlet at the extreme southern end of the Champagne appellation. (Chablis, the northernmost part of Burgundy, is basically just across the way.)

Pierre quit the bank in 1985 to focus full-time on Champagne, and his son Bertrand finished his enology studies and joined him in 1993. Bertrand took control in 2001, and that's when the revolution really began. From his 17 acres of vines he started crafting some exquisitely beautiful wines, the likes of which defied what most people thought could be done in the Aube. The Aube is essentially planted entirely to Pinot Noir (though there's a tiny percentage of Chardonnay and Pinot Blanc in production.) What makes it unique is that it's Pinot Noir planted on Kimmeridgian limestone-based soils - the same terroir that produces the magnificently mineral-driven Chardonnay of Chablis.

Bertrand is a thoughtful, soulful man, and his wines reflect that directly. Wines are not only products of their place of origin, their terroir, but also of the human beings that bring them to life. I find a very spiritual element to Bertrand's wines, which echoes his zen-like approach to his vineyards and his life. He finds it totally natural to move his viticulture in an organic direction, has eliminated all herbicides, and continues to experiment with Biodynamics as well. His stainless-steel tanks are all lined with enamel - he doesn't like the idea of the wines being in contact with the cold, impersonal steel.

Ultimately, the Brigandat wines took things a step or two beyond the "Modern Classics" style, and pushed the edges of the envelope a bit, but didn't yet ripe it wide open. That came in the 3rd wave, which we'll explore after these two beauties from Bertrand.



3. Champagne Pierre Brigandat – “**Millésime 2015**” Extra-Brut \$38

The Brigandat wines are always extremely well priced. He’s not a media-darling, and hasn’t yet been discovered by the chi-chi crowd, so his wines trade at at numbers that are absurdly low for the quality (but who are we to complain!) I found my way to Bertrand’s nearly 10 years ago, and have been thrilled with great wines year after year.

This one represents undoubtedly the best deal on vintage Champers anywhere (less than 10% of Champagne is vintage-dated - which requires a minimum of 3 years of aging, and must come entirely from one year’s harvest.)

- 100% Pinot Noir, from Channes, Les Riceys & Buxeuil
- 100% from 2015, a vintage with small quantity and good quality in the Aube
- Vinification in stainless-steel tank, malolactic fermentation allowed
- Disgorged May 2019 – 3+ years on the lees
- Dosage – 5 g/l

Pinot Noir on intense limestone soil brings a clear-cut mineral definition to the wine. It’s a touch warmer here than in northern Champagne, so the grapes often show more depth of ripeness and richness. Bertrand’s light hand in vinification and élevage make this a very graceful beauty - deftly balanced throughout and good persistence on a flowy, ethereal finish.



4. Champagne Pierre Brigandat – “Dentelles & Crinolines” 2015 \$42

The name means “Lace and Petticoats” - and the name pretty much says it all. The only wine in the Brigandat stable that’s not 100% Pinot Noir, as there’s a touch of Chardonnay in the mix that brings some citrus flavors and aromas to the party, and accentuates the yeasty notes.

- 100% from the 2015 harvest
- 70% Pinot Noir, 30% Chardonnay
- Chardonnay was fermented and aged in barrel
- Dosage 5g/l - Disgorged May 2019

Bertrand doesn’t make this wine every year, but when he does it’s a lock to be special. There is very little Chardonnay in the Aube, which is surprising given that the terroir is a perfect fit. In combination with the Pinot Noir it gives the wine exactly what the name implies - lacy elegance AND solid structure to support it. Low yields, organic farming, and a very hands-off protocol in the winery all unite to make this a delicious treasure. Enjoy!



Champagne's Third Wave

After the New School guys had opened up some new avenues of exploration (barrel fermentation and aging, single-vineyard Champagnes, Organic & Biodynamic viticulture, a tendency toward low or no-dosage for most wines, etc.) - the Third Wave of Grower Champagne started pushing all of these concepts to new limits and continued exploring new and uncharted ground.

This when the “Burgundization” of Champagne started to kick in. Where for centuries the concept of “blending everything” had been the accepted norm, the new rebels began to turn the focus on making wines of Terroir - wines that specifically represented the unique parcels of land they came from - the mantra of Burgundy. Pinot Meunier, long relegated to a lower-tier status as “just a blending grape”, started coming to the forefront and we saw an explosion of 100% Pinot Meunier Champagnes. Everything conventional wisdom said you “can’t do” in Champagne started being done, and done successfully. Suddenly, in the blink of an eye, Champagne had become the most exciting and dynamic wine region in the world - a place that had essentially been asleep for the previous 200-300 years.



View from the top of the l'Argillier vineyard in Vile-sur-Arce

Champagne Coessens

Champagne Coessens is a prime example. Hidden in the hills of Ville-sur-Arce, a minuscule hamlet tucked away in the Aube, 5th-generation vigneron **Jérôme Coessens** inherited the family 5.5 -acre vineyard in 2003. His father had played around with making a little Champagne, but had mostly sold all of the grapes to the negociants. Being a huge Burgundy fan, Jérôme set out to discover what the terroir of his vineyard was all about, and hired geologists and soil experts to dig pits all over his land to see what he was dealing with.

What he discovered was yes, he was indeed on a bed of Kimmeridgian limestone, but unusually for the region his site also had a very high concentration of clay in the soil - to varying degrees in different parts of the vineyard. The vineyard is named "l'Argillier" - Argile being the French word for clay. Clay soils typically bring power and structure to wines - the Burgundian Village of Pommard, where the wines tend to be masculine, structured and powerful, also has a high concentration clay, for example.

Further exploration and experimentation revealed that within his 5.5 acres there were four distinct sub-terrors that manifested themselves in the wines. He started vinifying different parcels separately, and found there was a section that tended to show more minerality, one that accentuated the fruit, another brought forth the more floral aspects, and one that was focused on structure and power.

This gave him an interesting palette to work with in the winery, and over the years he arrived at eight distinctly different wines he produces from this one 5.5-acre plot. All of them are: 100% Pinot Noir, 100% from a single vintage, 100% from this one single vineyard - pretty much the antithesis of what "Classic" Champagne had been for centuries. Oh, and the vineyard is a Monopole, meaning he owns all of it - another rarity in Champagne. As in Burgundy, most vineyards have been divided and sub-divided over the generations to the point where they are owned by 20-90 different owners.

It's relatively easy to be "different", much harder to be "great". Coessens is one of the first Third-Wavers to achieve true greatness - his wines are masterful examples of what pushing the boundaries can achieve when done with intention, skill, patience, and the gift of some magical terroir.



5. Champagne Coessens - "Brut Nature"

\$65

Only made in years that achieve maximum ripeness. This shows you that great Champagnes do not need any sugar addition - IF the grapes are grown in a place where they can get ripe enough, and IF they are harvested at the peak of maturity while maintaining a moderate level of acidity. It has become fashionable to make No-Dosage Champagnes lately, but many of them are too austere and lack the requisite fruit ripeness to make them pleasant to drink. Blind, I would never think this was a Brut Nature, as the fruit is ample and rich. Yummy notes and aromas of citrus fruits, liquid limestone, richly bodied from the clay, and a refined, precise finish from the mineral bedrock. Absolutely gorgeous stuff.

- 100% from the "Mineral" section of the vineyard
- 100% Pinot Noir from the 2014 harvest
- Malolactic fermentation completed
- Disgorged February 2019 No Sugar added - ZERO dosage
- 350 cases produced



Aerial view of Coessens' l'Argillier Vineyard, detailing the four sub-sections

6.

Champagne Coessens - Millésime 2014

\$75

Only made in years that have something distinctive to say. This one showcases an entirely different voice of the vineyard - amazing in that it's just a couple hundred meters away. This section of l'Argillier has the highest concentration of clay, and brings the wine a more full-bodied richness. It shows ripe berry fruits on the nose with some seductive whiffs of cocoa and chocolate, then more rich fruit on the palate, and a marked salinity on the finish that ties it all together and wraps up a magnificent package. This is a Champagne that demands attention - listen closely and enjoy what it has to say!

- 100% Pinot Noir, fermented in stainless steel tank and
- Malolactic fermentation was allowed
- Disgorged June 2018
- Dosage 5 grams per liter



Jérôme Coessens, showing Scott the terroir of l'Argillier

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

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. Email Scott@caveauselections.com for more information.



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