



Champagne Club

SPRING 2021



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.

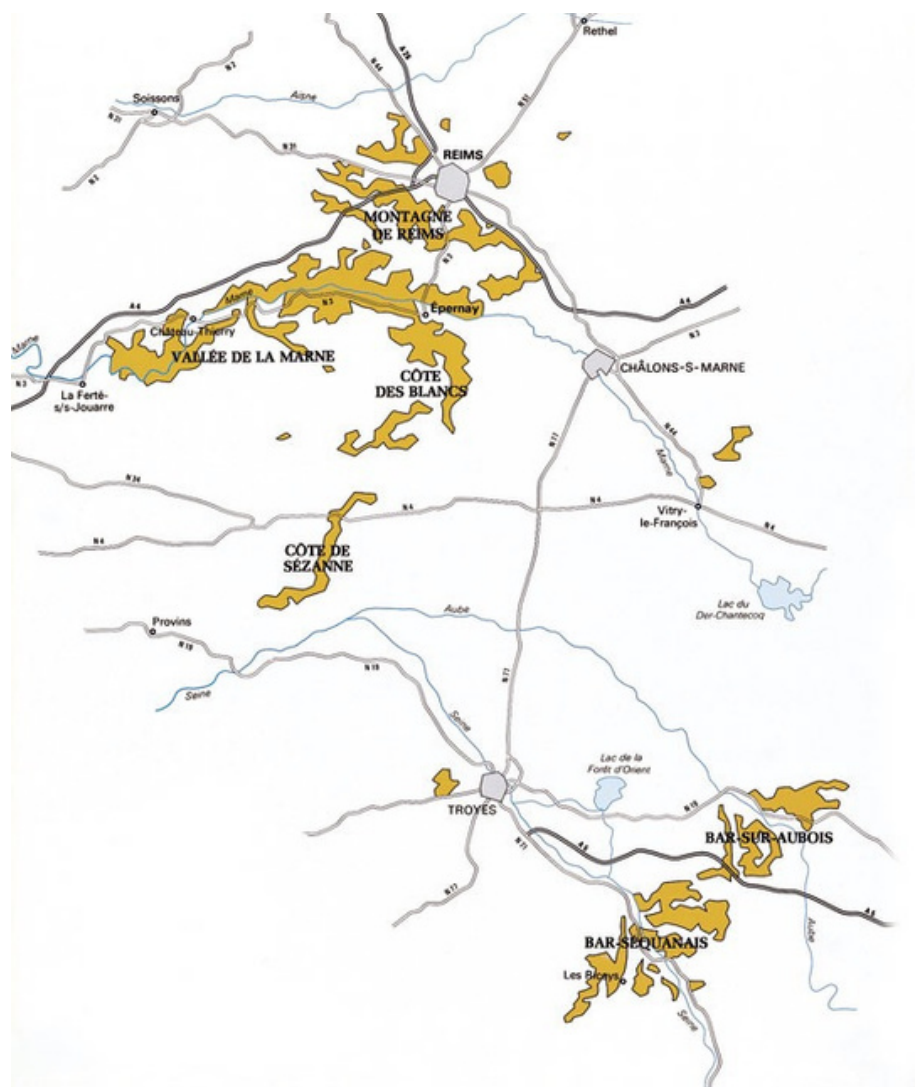
This club functions just like our **Burgundy Club** (and if you're not already a member, you can sign-up on the website). Also, check-out our new **"House Wine" Clubs** if you're interested in a regular supply of yummy Burgundy at around \$20-\$25 per bottle!

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.

This shipment takes us all around the vast Champagne region, from the **Aube** in the south to the northern reaches of the **Montagne de Reims**, and just about everywhere in between - it's a great way to get a look at the difference *terroir* makes.

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"**.





Yes, Champagne is Wine. It's also a wine of PLACE.

For over 200 years we were fed the notion that Champagne was a wine of blending and winemaking, and that the provenance of the grapes mattered little. That's really amazing, if you think about - as there is clear evidence that as far back as the late 1600s they knew with great certainty that wines made from different villages in the Champagne region were significantly different, and that some were clearly better than others.

The Grower Champagne revolution of the last 25 years - and yes, it has indeed been a revolution - has brought to the forefront the undeniable fact that Champagne is, at its best, a wine of terroir. The specific characteristics of the place where the grapes were grown is of the ultimate importance. A great wine still requires great winemaking and great viticulture, but the quality of the raw material, and the intrinsic qualities of the fruit derived from its place of origin are the very core of what the resulting wine is all about.

The increased availability of hand-crafted, place-specific and personality-driven wines - at prices that are a fraction of the mass-produced "Luxury Brands", is the other great thing that was brought about by the Grower revolution. We are fortunate to be living in the Golden Age of Champagne - the wines have never been better, the selection never wider, the prices never more accessible. Yay!



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 **Negociant 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 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 over 7,500 of these small grower-producers in Champagne, but fewer than 300 of them are available here in the U.S.



Grower Vs Negociant 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 Negociant Champagne is bad - some of it is flat-out marvelous. **Krug, Salon, Bollinger, Roederer, Jacquesson** and many others are negocies 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.



A Tour Around Champagne

There are **319 small villages** scattered across a vast area that collectively make up the region we know as Champagne. It takes up a lot of space in eastern France - it can take over two and a half hours to drive from one end to the other. There are vast stretches in the region where there are no vineyards at all. In those spots, the deep, rich soils are more suited to grain production (mostly wheat), as they lack the chalk that makes Champagne so unique. Sparkling wine from elsewhere in the world can be interesting, but it can never be Champagne. At the end of the day, **it's all about the chalk.**

Of course, not all chalk is created equal. There are examples of chalk from different geological eras, soft chalk, hard, stony chalk, chalk mixed with clay, chalk mixed with stones, chalk mixed with bands of limestone - all of which bring different things to the resulting wines. It's only been over the last 20-25 years or so that we've had real opportunity to taste a lot of examples of the difference terroir makes in Champagne. For centuries the standard practice was to blend everything from everywhere to create a consistent "house" style. Now that we have all these great small-production Grower Champagnes available, we see that Champagne is becoming more and more like Burgundy, home to wines that first and foremost express the unique place of their birth.



Champagne is typically divided into five distinct sub-regions. They each have a wide range of terroirs and characteristics within them, but it is helpful to generalize a bit to get a good overall feel for it.

The Montagne de Reims

Generally speaking, this is Pinot Noir territory. All three major Champagne grapes are grown here to some degree, but it's Pinot Noir that dominates. The vineyards are on the slopes surrounding the small villages than fan out to the south, east and west of the city of Reims (pronounced *Rance*), the largest city and winemaking capital of Champagne. The ancient chalk beds run deep under these soils, combining with clay and limestone to bring powerful expressions of Pinot Noir, the best of which come from the Grand Cru villages of Ambonnay and Bouzy.

The western edge of the Montagne contains a sub-region known the ***Petit Montagne*** - where Pinot Meunier does exceptionally well.



The Marne Valley

These vineyards are strung out along each side of the Marne River, which runs east-west through Champagne and essentially bisects the region. These are generally the coolest spots in Champagne, which is of course already a very cool-climate grape-growing region, just at the margin of being warm enough to effectively ripen grapes.

The Marne valley vineyards, due to their proximity to the river and being generally at lower elevations, are often at risk for spring frosts. This is why Pinot Meunier dominates here - it is the most frost-resistant of the Champagne varieties.

This region is perhaps the most widely varied - with some villages on the south-facing slopes being among the warmest in Champagne, and others (like on the western edge, only 45 minutes from Paris) exceptionally cool and at the very limit of viable grape-growing. You'll find all three major grape varieties here, but Pinot Meunier dominates by far.

The Côte des Blancs

As the name would indicate, this is home to Chardonnay. Most of the great Blanc de Blancs Champagnes hail from the legendary Grand Cru villages of Cramant, Avize, Oger and Mesnil-sur-Oger. One solid band of intense chalk runs north-to-south through these villages, and produces grapes that are the most sought after and most valuable in all of Champagne. There's an intensity to the chalkiness and minerality that is expressed in the wines that has no peer. This is the "Montrachet" of Champagne - world class and entirely unique.

The Côte de Sézanne

Drive south-west for 30 minutes or so from the Côte des Blancs and you'll roll into the Côte de Sézanne. It's historically been, and continues to be, the source of a lot of grapes that make their way into many of the mass-market negociant Champagnes. There are some 6,000 acres of vines here, 75% of which are Chardonnay, which seems to be best suited to the soils and climate.

The fruit from here is good, but not necessarily distinctive, so there are very few Champagnes of note that are exclusively from Sézannais fruit. (Our producer Pertois-Moriset happens to make a very nice 50-50 Chardonnay-Pinot Noir blend from their holdings there that is quite excellent.)

All that said, like every other sub-region of Champagne, the Grower revolution is happening here, but to a lesser extent. I'll be keeping an eye out for more exciting artisanal bottlings from the Côte de Sézanne in the near future.

The Aube

Also known as **The Bar**, this southernmost sector of Champagne is perhaps the most dynamic these days, infused with new blood from a new generation of envelope-stretching producers.

Back in the Middle Ages, the Aube was the wealthiest region in Champagne, and the city of Troyes was the center of it all - what Reims and Epernay are today. When the "capitols" of Champagne moved north, the Aube fell out of favor, and the big houses fought aggressively to deny the Aube vineyards the right to the Champagne appellation. It wasn't until 1927 they were finally granted that status.

The Aube is predominantly Pinot Noir, with a scant few hectares of Chardonnay (and a little Pinot Blanc in some villages) among the nearly 20,000 acres of vines here.

The terroir is unique in the Aube, as is the climate, when compared with the rest of Champagne. Many of the vineyards are on an underlying bed of *Kimmeridgian* Limestone - the same soils that make Chablis so special (and the southern-most parts of the Aube are just a few kilometers from Chablis, in fact. Here, one is closer to Burgundy than to Reims!)

Being over 100 miles or so south of Epernay, it is a lot warmer here than in the Marne Valley or the Montagne de Reims. As a result, the Pinot Noir more easily achieves good levels of ripeness, and the Champagnes exhibit richer, and riper fruit characteristics, while maintaining a beautiful limestone-driven streak of minerality.

Now then, let's go taste some wines!





Janisson-Baradon - Brut Nature - \$44

Cyril Janisson and his brother Maxence are the 5th generation in charge of the family estate. All of their vineyard parcels are on the hillsides above the city of Épernay - on the southern bank of the Marne Valley. The soils surrounding Épernay have heavy concentrations of clay mixed in with the chalk, and the resulting wines tend to be on the bigger, more powerful end of the spectrum. The Janisson-Baradon wines always show a deep fruit expression and are rich in body.

Brut Nature means no dosage - no sugar added - resulting in Champagne in its absolute purest and most pristine form. For Champagne to work without any sugar, the base wine needs to have been made from grapes that were fully ripe and packed with concentrated flavor. A Brut Nature needs to be a natural beauty that requires no makeup - and this is a gorgeous example.

It's 50-50 Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from the 2015 vintage, with 25% reserve wine from 2014 & '13 in the blend. The reserve wine is held in used Burgundy barrels, a practice we're seeing more and more of from the new generation of grower-producers.

A full five years of flavor development on the lees prior to disgorging in spring 2020 brings a heady mix of rich stone fruits, biscuit dough, and a bright minerality that make this very appealing. The clay mixed in with the chalk brings a nice underlying power to this quite magical bottling.

- 50% Pinot Noir, 50% Chardonnay, all from organically-farmed estate vineyards
- 75% from the 2015 harvest, with reserve wines from 2014 & 2013
- Over 5 years on the lees in bottle
- Disgorged in April, 2020 with ZERO dosage



Pierre Brigandat - Blanc de Noirs- \$33

Brigandat (bree-gawn-dah) is one of the first grower-producers to emerge in the new era of the Aube. It's Pierre's son Bertrand who makes the wines, having taken over from his dad back in 2001. The vines were planted in 1965 in the miniscule hamlet of Channes, the very last village in the Champagne appellation before you cross over into Chablis. The soils here are Kimmeridgian limestone - the same stuff found in Chablis - so the resulting wines have a beautiful minerality to them, unlike anything else in Champagne.



The Pierre Brigandat Blanc de Noirs is a superb example of what the Aube can do. Packed with ripe, rich Pinot fruit and wrapped up in a beautiful minerality - it's absolutely delicious, and one of the greatest values in all of Champagne. I love the elegant texture on the palate, the delicate mousse, and the superb balance between power and finesse. This one rocks as an apéritif and with food - you can't miss!

- 100% Pinot Noir from the Brigandat estate in Channes
- Based on the 2017 harvest, with 20% reserve wines from 2016 & 2015 in the blend.
- Three years of extended lees contact
- Disgorged in June 2020, dosage 6 grams per liter





Champagne Cossy - 2011 Sophistiqué \$56

Winemaker **Sophie Cossy's** vineyards are all in the adjoining villages of Jouy-lès-Reims, Pargny-lès-Reims and Ville-Dommange in the heart of the "Petite Montagne" section of the Montagne de Reims. "Petite" does not infer that it is lesser, it is simply a reference to a generally lower elevation than the "Grand Montagne" section to the east and south. Just 10 minutes west of the city, it's a sea of vines as far as you can see in every direction, and all three major Champagne grapes are grown here. 50% of the acreage on the Petite Montagne is planted to Pinot Meunier, 35% is Pinot Noir, with only 15% devoted to Chardonnay. The soils have a lot of sand mixed in with clay over the chalk bedrock, with the resulting wines tending to be dense and more structured as a general rule.

This hillside happens to be one of the best areas for Pinot Meunier - which otherwise is mostly planted in the Vallée de la Marne. Cossy has traditionally blended all three major grapes for their wines, but they tend to be dominated by Meunier.

Not so this time around. This is an outlier from Cossy - Sophie's **Cuvée Sophistiqué** is mostly Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, and it gets a full **eight years** of ageing on the lees, making it the most complex, boldest, and intense wine in her range. That said, it's still supremely elegant, the hallmark of everything from this magnificent cellar.

- 40% Pinot Noir, 40% Chardonnay, 20% Pinot Meunier, all from organically-farmed estate vineyards
- 100% from the 2011 harvest
- Over 8 years on the lees in bottle
- Disgorged April 2020, Dosage 5.5 grams per liter





Laherte Frères - "Grandes Crayères" - \$66
"Les Vignes d'Autrefois" - \$66
"Longues Voyes" - \$66

Champagne **Laherte Frères** has been on a major roll since young Aurélien Laherte took full control of the operation some 9 years ago (though he'd been working side-by-side with his dad, Thierry, since 2002.) Aurélien is the 7th generation to run the family estate, one of the rare ones that started making and selling wine under their own label decades ago, before the Grower revolution began.

His dad embarked on some out-of-the-box thinking and non-traditional practices over 20 years ago, and Aurélien has taken them to fruition in his never ending quest for excellence, all in the name of making Champagnes that are first and foremost wines of place.

Laherte has vineyards in 10 different villages in Champagne, but is based in the hilltop village of **Chavot**, just a few minutes south of Epernay. It's in the heart of what is known as the **Coteaux Sud d'Epernay** - a small group of villages that are sandwiched between the Marne Valley to the North and the Côte des Blancs just to the south.

Aurélien has emerged as one of the major stars in the Grower Champagne world, and his wines are coveted across the globe. From time to time we've been able to convince him to give us a couple of great bottlings to include in our Club packages, and I'm happy to announce we have three of his beauties for you this time. (One of the best ways to learn about wine is to taste wines side-by-side, especially if they're from the same winemaker.)

These three will serve as great illustrations of the difference terroir makes, as well as the distinct characteristics of each of the three major Champagne grapes. Each of these wines are made from a single grape variety, and from a single place, so they are very pure expressions of the combination of grape and soil.

2016 Les Grand Crayères

Aurélien produces three different Blanc de Blancs bottlings, with this one being the newest edition to the range - he made it for the first time in the 2014 vintage.

It's all from his oldest vines of Chardonnay on the steep west-facing hillside of the village of Chavot, in a section where the soil is predominantly **soft chalk**. All the vines are "*Selection Massale*", meaning they were propagated from cuttings of the estate's best vines - there are no commercial, nursery-bred clones in this parcel. Uniquely, many of them are non-grafted vines - meaning they are on their own original roots, rather than phylloxera-resistant rootstocks.

The result is a crisp wine with pinpoint-pure bubbles, an ethereal nose, and captivating hints of lemon-lime and bread dough. Seductive and totally delightful!

- 100% old-vine Chardonnay from the Laherte Estate parcels in the village of Chavot
- Barrel-fermented
- Malolactic fermentation was blocked
- Dosage - 3 g/l



2016 Les Vignes d'Autrefois

The name means "Vines from another/ancient time". This one is entirely **Pinot Meunier**, which does exceptionally well in the Coteaux Sud d'Epernay. These are the estate's oldest vines, planted by Aurélien's ancestors in 1947 and 1953. The fruit is from parcels in two different villages - Chavot, in a sector where the soils are silt and clay and flint over a bed of chalk, and the neighboring village of Mancy, where the soils are dominated by clay.

This is an achingly beautiful wine, blessed with great depth, texture, and nuance. Rich and voluminous in the mouth, subtle floral notes, red currants, an absolute knockout.

- 100% old-vine Pinot Meunier from Chavot and Mancy
- Barrel Fermented
- Malolactic fermentation was blocked
- Dosage 2.5 g/l



Les Longues Voyes

"The Long Rows" takes us to the Laherte parcels on the Montagne de Reims (Aurélien's wife Carine hails from there and her family connections helped hook up Laherte's newest parcels there.) 100% Pinot Noir from the top 1er Cru villages on the Montagne, this is a textbook example of how lovely Montagne Pinot Noir-based Champagnes can be.

Here we have mostly silty & clay-based soils over a bed of solid limestone, which brings intense freshness, minerality, and a controlled power to the wine in your glass.

In the mouth there's a lot of accessible, pretty fruit - a nice mix of black and red berries, velvety textured across the palate, very approachable, very fresh, very user-friendly, very Pinot.

- 100% Pinot Noir from the Montagne de Reims
- Barrel Fermented
- Aged in barrel for 18 months, then another two years in bottle
- Malolactic fermentation was blocked
- Dosage 3.5 g/l



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 fall, and for pre-arrival offerings on all the yummy Bubbly and Burgundies 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, winemakers in Oregon, Champagne and Burgundy since 1999. 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.

