

Worksheet Twenty

THE CAPITAL OF CHAMPAGNE AND ENVIRONS

Two champagnes in this tasting showcase the principal grapes of the area. The four blends exhibit their makers' expertise: three from lesser-known Houses based in the 'capital' of the Champagne plus a selection from Moët & Chandon. If you only want one bottle, choose the Pierre Gimonnet, preferable with some cork age.

- » Pierre Gimonnet & Fils Blanc de Blancs Premier Cru Cuis NV
- » Champagne Laherte Frères Les Vignes d'Autrefois NV (Chavot-Courcourt)
- » Besserat de Bellefon Cuvée des Moines Brut NV
- » Boizel Brut Réserve NV
- » Alfred Gratien Brut Classique NV
- » Moët & Chandon Grand Vintage

Champagne Pierre Gimonnet & Fils Premier Cru Cuis Blanc de Blancs

100% Chardonnay

Gimonnet's champagnes include a high proportion of grapes from older vines in the *cuvées*, and always drink superbly. The Blanc de Blancs Premier Cru is a frank, open and fresh style, with lovely elegance of fruit and well-presented minerality – typical of the Cuis *terroir*, in fact. Vinified in stainless steel, the wines undergo malolactic fermentation to give them a ready approachability. Reserve wines, a blend of four prior years, are kept on cork in individual year batches, and then carefully selected to balance the current vintage. For example, the superb 2008 was blended with a little less than 4% each of 2004 and 2006, 7.5% of the 2005 and 13.3% of the 2007, whereas the 2009 blend had no additional 2008, but 4% of the 2004, 5% of the 2005 and 12% of the 2007. Each year has its variations, and the blending sensitively reflects that fact in the NV Brut. Dosage is usually in a mid-range of 7–8 g/L, and the wines are always balanced between sweet fruit and acidity for freshness.

This wine was chosen as an example of what a particular commune of the Côteaux Sud d'Épernay can produce when it is so close to the Côte des Blancs.

Appearance

Aromas

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Palate (flavour, texture, balance, structure)

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Length

Distinguishing feature, or your comment

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Serve when?

With what?

Champagne Laherte Frères Les Vignes D'Autrefois NV

Not quite 100% Meunier

The House was founded in 1889 in the commune of Chavot by Jean-Baptiste Laherte. A fortunate marriage in the fourth generation then led to the expansion of the estate. Today Laherte Frères, managed by Aurélien Laherte, is a modern, family-run estate of 10 hectares divided into 75 parcels. The family leans towards a bio-dynamic approach. Replacement vines are reproduced from the oldest vines (the age of the plantings from 1947–53, many from old French root stock), and others with *massale* selection to preserve consistency of the grapes quality.¹ *Les Vignes d'Autrefois* refers to the blend of 100% Meunier with a little stray Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Fromenteau, from named vineyards in Chavot and Mancy. The wine is vinified for six months in oak barrels, with regular *bâtonnage*, and without malolactic fermentation. Spice, chalkiness and floral notes precede fruity aromas of red berries such as raspberry and cherries. The attack is fresh and delicate, and the long dry finish is accentuated by minerality. An aperitif style which repays cellaring. Dosage is 2–4 g/L.

This wine was also chosen as an example of the champagne from villages of the Côteaux Sud d'Épernay.

Appearance

Aromas

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Palate (flavour, texture, balance, structure)

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Length

Distinguishing feature, or your comment

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Serve when?

With what?

Besserat de Bellefon Cuvée Des Moines Brut NV

35% Chardonnay, 20% Pinot Noir, 45% Meunier

In 1843, Edmond Besserat decided to join the champagne gold rush. In 1927, one of his grandsons, also Edmond, married Yvonne de Méric de Bellefon and the House was renamed accordingly. This House, very popular with the restaurants of Paris, was asked to produce a champagne which could match any meal. Originally named 'Crémant' because the champagne was produced at a lower pressure than normal, the name had to change when the legislation changed in 1985. Cuvée des Moines (the monks' blend) is the name the champagne goes by now, but its essence has not changed. It remains a creamily styled lower-pressure champagne (like Mumm de Cramant and other champagnes in Besserat de Bellefon's unique range). In 2006, the firm joined the Lanson BCC Champagne Group, where its *cuvées* are delicately assembled by *chef de cave* Cédric Thiébault. This example is a blend from 14 villages. Malolactic fermentation is avoided to retain the fresh fruit spirit of the champagne alongside its soft, creamy, lacy texture. The wine is aged 4–5 years on its lees, and 20-40% reserve wines are added depending on the year of the base wine. Dosage is 9 g/L.

Appearance

Aromas

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Palate (flavour, texture, balance, structure)

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Length

Distinguishing feature, or your comment

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Serve when?

With what?

Boizel Brut Réserve NV

Ancestors of the Boizels grew grapes in the Marne Valley from the seventeenth century, when they were established at Ay. In 1834, the House was launched by husband and wife Auguste Boizel and Julie Martin, who was from a vinegrowing family. Their son, Edouard, was one of the early pioneers of the movement to Brut-style champagnes. In 1920, one of the company's first Blanc de Blancs was produced. Between the World Wars, the wines were exported to Europe and even as far as Australia. After the Second World War, the company was re-invigorated under the guidance of René Boizel. Unexpectedly, in 1973 Evelyne Boizel – married to Christophe Roques and living in Paris – found herself tapped on the shoulder to take over the company. This she has done with great aplomb, working together with her husband. In 1994, a decision was made to join the group headed by the entrepreneur Philippe Baijot; the group was then renamed Boizel-Chanoine Champagne Group and an infusion of capital breathed new life into the company. The goal of *chef de cave* Christophe Roques is to create balance between about 30–50 different communes in a seamless blend, using about 25% reserve wines, with no one *terroir* obtruding and balancing the wine between its sugar and natural acidity. The Brut Réserve is known for its attractively fleshy palate. Dosage is 9 g/L.

Appearance

Aromas

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Palate (flavour, texture, balance, structure)

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Length

Distinguishing feature, or your comment

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Serve when?

With what?

Alfred Gratien Brut Classique NV

42% Chardonnay, 15% Pinot Noir, 43% Meunier

When Champagne's winemakers are asked whose work they most admire, many single out Champagne Alfred Gratien. 'The most rigorously old-fashioned Champagne House of the oak school', writes Michael Edwards.² Alfred Gratien was originally from the Loire Valley, where he began a sparkling wine company at the same time as he founded Champagne Alfred Gratien in Épernay. It was 1864, and he was in his early twenties. The champagnes received early success in the restaurants of Paris. The business is today owned by the German sparkling wine company Henkell Söhnlein, which has begun the slow process of acquiring Grand and Premier Cru vineyards as locally as possible. Careful grape selection from selected loyal growers, reduced yields and traditional winemaking are the hallmarks of the business. Ensuring the continuation of tradition, the role of *chef de cave* has passed from father to son for four generations. Primary fermentation is prolonged to 6–12 months in old 228 litre oak casks (of which the House has over 800); there is no malolactic fermentation, so as to preserve fruit and freshness during long ageing.³ Bottles are hand-riddled and vintages are stored on cork to permit further gentle oxidative interest during an extended time on lees after secondary fermentation of at least three years for non-vintage. Production volume is necessarily limited. The Brut Classique, a blend of about 65 *cuvées* from 25 different *crus*, contains 15% reserve wines. Full-bodied and vinous, yet fresh, pure, smooth and long on the palate; depending on bottle age, the champagne may have acquired smoky notes. Alfred Gratien's champagnes are known to age superbly on cork. Dosage is 10.75 g/L.

Appearance

Aromas

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Palate (flavour, texture, balance, structure)

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Length

Distinguishing feature, or your comment

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Serve when?

With what?

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Moët & Chandon Grand Vintage

Consult the company's website or a local Moët Hennessy representative for your vintage's degustation notes.

Appearance

Aromas

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Palate (flavour, texture, balance, structure)

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Length

Distinguishing feature, or your comment

Serve when?

With what?

Which champagne is your preference?

Can you say why?
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If you were to do this tasting again, in what order would you place the champagnes?
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Why?
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ENDNOTES

1. *Sélection massale* is propagation using cuttings from an old vine, or burying a cane growing from the old vine and using the resulting plant from the buried section.
2. Edwards, Edwards, Michael, *The Finest Wines of Champagne: A Guide to the Best Houses, Cuvées and Growers*, Aurum Press Ltd, London, 2009, p. 177.
3. The Alfred Gratien website states 6 months for primary fermentation; Curien 2012–13 states 12 months, p. 225.