

## Worksheet Twenty Six

# UNDERRATED VILLAGES

Experience the aromas and flavours of different *terroirs* expressed in the champagnes listed below. Consider whether the contents of your glass are the result of nature or nurture, or both.

- » Francis Boulard 'Les Rachais' Brut Nature Blanc de Blancs NV
- » Françoise Bedel 'L'Âme de la Terre' Vintage
- » Jacques Picard 'Sélection' Brut NV
- » Jérôme Prévost 'La Closerie Les Béguines' NV
- » Dosnon 'Récolte Brute' NV
- » Vouette & Sorbée 'Cuvée Fidele' Blanc de Noirs NV

### Francis Boulard 'Les Rachais' Brut Nature Blanc de Blancs NV

*100% Chardonnay*

The Boulard family has been growing grapes and making wine for at least six generations on the slopes of the Massif de St Thierry, including the northernmost village in Champagne, Cormicy, and from a couple of plots in the Marne Valley. Apart from a holding at Mailly, the rest of its vineyards are rated in the lower 80s in the échelle des crus system.

Grapes for this champagne come from a single low-yielding plot, 'Hurtebise/Les Rachais', in Cauroy-les Hermonville, which was listed as 'fifth category' – only 62 per cent on an old échelle des crus rating.<sup>1</sup> It is cultivated using biodynamic principles and following the lunar calendar (Ecocert-certified since 1997). Boulard and his daughter, Delphine, use shoots from the best plants in the plot to propagate scions to replace sick or missing plants.<sup>2</sup> This technique allows a vineyard's quality to be improved while conserving its individuality and character. In the 'Hurtebise' vineyard the average age of its vines, over 40 years, has the effect of reducing the yield, which is further decreased by short pruning. Ploughing and natural weeds compete with the roots of the vines, driving them deep down into the sandy limestone below. For many years, harvesting has been timed to give the highest possible natural sugar, regardless of acidity.

After especially delicate pressing – as soon after picking as possible – vinification begins on fine lees in small oak barrels, with fermentation using indigenous yeasts, and frequent *bâtonnage* according to biodynamic principles. The wine undergoes malolactic fermentation. There is no fining or filtration. Biodynamic principles also apply to bottling, which occurs on 'fruit days' of the lunar calendar.

Before tasting, the champagne should be allowed to breathe for several minutes; the suggested serving temperature is 10°C. This champagne is regularly in the annual list of top 25 wines in the *Revue des Vins de France*, remains among Editors' Choices and receives important citations in wine guidebooks.

Description .....

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Distinguishing features .....

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Score out of 10 .....

## Françoise Bedel 'L'Âme de la Terre' Vintage

*Always contains Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Meunier; often Chardonnay is dominant.*

Three generations ago, in 1979, Françoise Bedel took over the vineyards where her parents had grown grapes in the far west of the Marne Valley – parcels of vines spread around the communes of Crouettes-sur-Marne, Charly-sur-Marne, Villiers-St-Denis and Nanteuil-sur-Marne. Not one of the communes edged over 80 per cent on the échelle des crus, nor did they rate a mention in André Simon's old *History*. Today the vines are 20–60 years old.

Madame Bedel is another producer who believes that a biodynamic regime produces the best results in the vineyard and in the winery. Her grapes are taste-tested before picking. Each variety from each plot is pressed separately and kept individually for vinification in a mixture of barrels and enamelled vats. Before blending, the wines are evaluated for colour, smell and richness, and a number of blends are trialled. Finally, after a minimum of seven years on lees, a subtle dosage is added.

Each vintage of 'L'Âme de la Terre' – which means 'the soul of the land' – features a different composition of Champagne's three main grape varieties, but the exact composition depends on what Nature provides. Although the blend is often Chardonnay-dominant, it may change radically from year to year.

Description .....

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Distinguishing features .....

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Score out of 10 .....

## Jacques Picard 'Sélection' Brut NV

*60% Chardonnay, 35% Pinot Noir, 5% Meunier*

Champagne Jacques Picard has, until recent attention in an Australian champagne guide, flown under the radar of most wine writers.<sup>3</sup> Although the family owns vines in other areas, Jacques Picard 'Sélection' Brut NV is from Berru, an extension of the Montagne de Reims with a subsoil of limestone and clay, which yields wines of body and round fruitiness coupled with a flinty character. The beautifully maintained Picard vineyard enjoys south-western exposure. Each parcel and variety is kept separate, for pressing on site in a sparkling, modernised winery. After a short first fermentation in stainless steel, the wines absorb flavour from their fine lees for six months. Blending is a family activity, involving the expert services of experienced winemaker José Lievens – always on hand as he is married to Roger Picard's younger daughter. The cuvée is then combined with 30 per cent reserve wines. Three years on lees allows the *terroir* to express itself fully. The champagnes are always rested for three months after dosage.

Description .....

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Distinguishing features .....

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Score out of 10 .....

## Jérôme Prévost 'La Closerie Les Béguines' NV

100% *Meunier*

Gueux, west of Reims, was an area that suffered badly during the First World War, the vineyards being obliterated under muddy trenches. Like the other villages in this chapter, its grapes were not highly rated in the past. The soils are calcareous, without being chalky (see Chapter 18), and signs of early marine life abound in the vineyard in the form of shells and fossils. Meunier is the most suitable grape at Gueux because of its frost-resisting quality.

Champagne Jérôme Prévost 'La Closerie Les Béguines' NV is the product of a poet, a sculptor, a dreamer, a visionary and a perfectionist. Prévost owns 2.2 hectares of vines, 2 hectares of which were old Meunier inherited from his grandmother in 1987, with the remaining portion planted to the three main varieties plus Pinot Blanc. In the beginning the grapes were sent to the local cooperative, but influenced, encouraged and aided by Anselme Selosse, he began to make his own champagnes – one white and one rosé style ('Fac Simile'), each based on a single year's harvest but not kept long enough on lees to be denoted 'Vintage'. Prévost has strong leanings to organic, biodynamic ways, being attuned to his earth and microclimate, close to his vines and their fruit, which is always picked very ripe.

The wines undergo a long fermentation with natural yeasts in small barrels, without additional sugar to raise the alcohol level (*chaptalisation*). There is no filtering or fining, and no dosage. The wines respond well to ageing on cork. For me, tasting his wines is like tasting the difference between organically grown, summer tomatoes and hothouse winter tomatoes, but with all the nuances added by fermentation, and a pleasantly unpredictable outcome – even within a single bottle. Allow the champagne some breathing time before tasting.

Description .....

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Distinguishing features .....

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Score out of 10 .....

## Dosnon 'Récolte Brute' NV

30% *Chardonnay*, 70% *Pinot Noir*

The commune of Avirey-Lingey, so close to Burgundy – almost bordering Chablis – is on the western side of the River Sarce, in the Barséquanais. Fifty per cent of its harvest is contracted to the big Houses, which value the fine Pinot Noir produced on the area's rolling hills. The vineyards slope down either side of the river valley and were rated 80 per cent on the most recent échelle des crus.

Davy Dosnon, born in the village, began his champagne enterprise in 2005 with his childhood friend Simon Lepage. Dosnon grows 70 per cent Pinot Noir and 30 per cent Chardonnay on just over 2 hectares. Grapes are also bought from 5 hectares nearby, to augment production. Severe pruning plus a secondary green leaf prune during the high growth phase curtail yields and concentrate fruit quality and flavour. Grass is grown between the rows of vines to compete with their shallow roots, and encourage taproots to drive deep into the ancient calcareous limestone and clay soil. After harvest – about a week earlier than in the north of Champagne – traditional pressing with minimal fruit handling precedes first fermentation in old Burgundian oak barrels over 8–10 months. There is no fining or filtering, just settling and draining off. The wines are blended and bottled for secondary fermentation, spending 20 months on lees, and are topped up later with a low dosage of 4 g/L.

Description .....

Distinguishing features .....

Score out of 10 .....

### **Vouette & Sorbée 'Cuvée Fidele' Blanc de Noirs NV**

*100% Pinot Noir*

The village of Buxières-sur-Arce, on the northern side of the Arce River, is in the Barséquanais although the subsoils are where Jurassic meets Portlandian in geological terms. It is another shell- and fossil-strewn area, with the beginnings of the scattered stones so typical of further south (see Chapter 17 on *terroir*).

Vouette and Sorbée are two named vineyards, of less than half a hectare and one hectare respectively, owned by Bertrand Gautherot. Gautherot was influenced by a vigneron whose name keeps surfacing: Anselme Selse. Fermentation with natural yeasts occurs in barrels 5–6 years old, without filtration or fining and without added sulphur. There is no dosage. Made from a single year's grapes, 'Fidèle' (and the 'Saignée de Sorbée' Rosé) are richly concentrated 100 per cent Pinot Noir champagnes, while 'Blanc d'Argile', 100 per cent Chardonnay, casts more than a nod to good Chablis.

Airing the champagne before tasting, and a drinking temperature of 10–12°C are recommended.

Description .....

Distinguishing features .....

Score out of 10 .....

### **ENDNOTES**

1. Simon, André, *A Wine Primer*, revised edition, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, U.K., 1973.
2. *op. cit.*, p. 23.
3. The technique is known as 'massal selection'.
4. Tyson Stelzer, *The Champagne Guide 2014–2015 e-book, 2014-15*, Hardie Grant, Richmond, Victoria, Australia, 2013 *op. cit.*, pp. 45, 56, 794–9.