

Worksheet Eight

THE ÉCHELLE DES CRUS SYSTEM: GRANDS, PREMIERS & OTHERS

The aim of this exercise is to compare champagnes across the *crus*, illustrating the differences between them, in an attempt to see how the choice of *crus* affects the quality of the finished champagnes – that is, whether the difference is detectable in the glass. The lone learner may wish to purchase a champagne designated Grand Cru to discern whether it is indeed superior to those consumed on a prior occasion.

There are two options below, depending on availability of the suggested champagnes.

Option One

- » Brice Cramant Grand Cru NV
- » Brice Aÿ Grand Cru NV
- » Brice Verzenay Grand Cru NV
- » Brice Bouzy Grand Cru NV
- » Cattier Premier Cru Brut NV
- » Devaux Grande Réserve NV

Option Two

- » Taittinger Prelude NV
- » Mumm Cuvée René Lalou Vintage
- » Cattier Premier Cru Brut NV
- » J. Lassalle Cuvée Préférence Premier Cru Chigny-Les-Roses Brut NV
- » Devaux Grande Réserve NV
- » Drappier Carte d'Or NV

OPTION ONE

The champagnes are four Grand Crus, one Premier Cru, plus one other. Pour the champagnes side by side, so that their aromas and flavours can be easily compared.

In the Grand Cru village of Bouzy is the small family firm of Brice, whose presence there since the seventeenth century bears witness to its intimate knowledge of and love for real Champagne. Champagne Brice itself was founded on 8 September 1994, after Vranken-Monopole acquired Barancourt, a *marque* in which Jean-Paul Brice was a partner, freeing him to return to the original Barancourt philosophy. With eight hectares of its own vineyards, supplemented by selected growths from 20 different *crus* – in particular those from Aÿ, Bouzy, Cramant and Verzenay – Brice has re-created a range of Grand Crus champagnes. Brice's oenologist and cellar master, Michel Joly, is responsible for the blending and vinification of the different *cuvées*. Today, son Jean-René Brice concentrates on viticulture while his brother Remi, formerly a sommelier in the UK, manages the market place. Thirty per cent of Brice champagnes are sold within France, the remainder internationally.

Brice selected these four particular villages to display 100% Grand Cru champagnes because in the very first classification of Champagne, dating back to the nineteenth century, these were the only four villages to be classified as Grand Cru. Champagne Brice, with its four Grand Cru wines, offers an intriguing and rewarding glimpse into what Champagne was and still can be. These wines show subtle

yet clear individuality, and they age well. Malolactic fermentation contributes to creaminess, while ageing on lees for two years contributes subtle, bready characters. As a curiosity, Brice also makes a still wine, Bouzy Rouge, which is aged four years in Burgundy barriques. Bouzy Rouge is the traditional wine of the village, older than champagne itself.

Brice Cramant Grand Cru Brut NV

100% Chardonnay

This wine originates only from the Grand Cru commune of Cramant. The village's vineyards cover about 350 hectares in the Côte des Blancs region, dedicated to Chardonnay. The south- to south-eastern exposure of the slopes benefits this grape variety, as it is sensitive to climatic variations. Wines from the village exude an aroma of white hawthorn. Cramant's Chardonnay is renowned for its shiny, silky, straw colour.

In appearance, the champagne is pale with tiny vibrant bubbles. The nose is delicate and open, revealing fresh aromas of citrus and white flowers, slate and apple, with hints of honey. On the palate, the wine is delicate, crystalline and ethereal, with excellent core Chardonnay characters, waves of delicacy and silkiness enveloping light citrus, with some grassiness and minerality. The champagne is beautifully balanced, with a long finish.

With time, the colour deepens to golden, while the mousse remains an effusion of small bubbles. The palate retains crispness but becomes creamy and ample, with flavours of very ripe yellow fruits, subdued notes of lemon, bubble gum and cherry liqueur. A warm doughy nose becomes evident, while on the palate the champagne remains fresh and lasting, with a dry finish. Hachette notes that this wine does not undergo malolactic fermentation¹. It complements shellfish, salmon and scallops – including seared scallops with pancetta and basil, says Brice.

Brice Aÿ Grand Cru Bru NV

10% Chardonnay, 90% Pinot Noir

The wine displays a golden colour with lively mousse. It originates only from vineyards in the village of Aÿ, which cover 367 hectares in the valley of the Marne. Their direct southern exposure and irregular slopes enable the Pinot Noir to ripen well. The wine's balance, generosity, sensuality and length are appreciable on the palate. The powerful Pinot Noir contributes baked apples, brioche, cherries and some minerality. The champagne is toasty, with a citrus finish and a length of spicy biscuit crumb. Brice suggests that it goes very well with guinea fowl, salmon, grilled lobster and rabbit.

Brice Bouzy Grand Cru Brut NV

20% Chardonnay, 80% Pinot Noir

This comes only from the Grand Cru vineyards of Bouzy, covering 374 hectares in the Mountain of Reims area. Geographic and climatic conditions are exceptional. Southern exposure gives the Pinot Noir aromas of red fruit, roundness, complexity and voluptuousness on the palate. The champagne has an old gold colour with a strong cordon. The nose is extremely fragrant, evoking red berry, tropical fruits and vanilla; it is intense with brioche and yeast. On the palate, the wine is very rich with a big structure, creamy, fresh and dry. You should find great complexity, with some spices, yellow fruits and minerals, all matched to a firm structure and dense texture. Powerful yet graceful, there is a terrific finish. Goes very well with foie gras, smoked salmon, fish or chicken.

Brice Verzenay Grand Cru Brut NV

25% Chardonnay, 75% Pinot Noir

Originating only from Verzenay. The Grand Cru vineyards of Verzenay, covering 418 hectares, are the most northerly of the Grand Cru in the Reims mountain range. The slopes are arrayed in such a way as to protect the vines from northern winds while benefitting from full exposure to the sun. Verzenay's

terroir encourages Pinot Noir’s expression of power, red berries, roundness, body and strength while the Chardonnay lifts the wine with a touch of elegance and delicate flavour. A bright golden colour, this Pinot Noir-led champagne from the sunniest Grand Cru village of the Mountain of Reims shows a lot of fruit ripeness. The nose is warm and reveals a subtle mix of aniseed, biscuit, grilled bread and a hint of iodine. The palate is even more intense: creamy and chalky, with flavours of candied lemon and a dry finish. This wine is definitely all about structure and balance. It goes very well with shellfish, lobster, fish and poultry.

Cattier Premier Cru Brut NV

25% Chardonnay, 40% Pinot Noir, 35% Meunier

The grapes for this wine are from Chigny-Les-Roses, which ranked 94% in the échelle des crus, and comprise a blend of three vintages. It is an amber gold colour, with copious effervescence. Floral and apple aromas join with a hint of citrus fruit to invite a tasting. On the palate, there’s a balance of freshness and vinosity, with dried fruit and brioche flavours. It has a long, crisp finish.

Devaux Grande Réserve Brut NV

30% Chardonnay, 70% Pinot Noir

An échelle des crus listing is not disclosed, but most of the fruit included is from what was an 80% échelle des crus Aube area. Some of the wine (10–20%) is fermented in oak barrels with the balance in stainless steel tanks, followed by malolactic fermentation. The champagne spends a minimum of three years on lees. The Chardonnay – sourced from both the Aube and the Côte des Blancs – gives lively finesse to the blend, which is dominated by Pinot Noir, bringing fruitiness and a long finish. Allowed to develop in the bottle, the wine will present aromas of the forest floor, and an even longer finish.

Champagne	Échelle des Crus	Your Preference
Brice Cramant	Grand Cru - 100%	
Brice Aÿ	Grand Cru - 100%	
Brice Bouzy	Grand Cru - 100%	
Brice Verzenay	Grand Cru - 100%	
Cattier	Premier Cru – was 94%	
Devaux Grande Réserve	Was rated 80%	

Do your preferences match the échelle des crus rating of the wines?

Use your own words to describe your favourite champagne – its appearance, aromas, flavour, texture.

Which is your least favourite, and why?

Which do you prefer of the first four? (*You will be expressing a village preference.*)

Of the final two?

OPTION TWO

Pour two champagnes at a time and taste them in pairs, side by side – one Grand Cru set, one Premier Cru set, then the final pair.

Taittinger Prélude Brut NV

50% Chardonnay, 50% Pinot Noir

Prélude is always made from Grand Cru fruit. Its finesse, structure and balance are apparent, with mineral notes from the Chardonnay and aromatic ones from the Pinot Noir adding rich, subtle warmth to the blend. There are beautiful aromas of buttery almonds and ripe fruits, almond macaroons, nougat and a hint of passionfruit, lightly vegetal after breathing. The palate is fresh and lively, with dominant citrus notes which unfold over time into ripe peaches. The texture is creamy and rich, yet elegantly silky. The long finish is plush, full of flavour and complexity. This wine is always aged for at least five years on its lees.

Mumm René Lalou Brut Vintage

50% Chardonnay, 50% Pinot Noir

Only made during vintage years. Named for the cellar master who oversaw Mumm for more than 50 years, the grapes used in this sublime champagne are from the best vineyards within Mumm's Grand Cru villages. The Chardonnay comes from Les Briquettes and Les Bionnes vineyards in Avize and from La Croix in Cramant, this last vineyard being one that Lalou helped to restore and replant after World War I. He also helped restore Les Rochelles in Verzenay and Les Houles in Verzy, and these two sites, together with vineyards he acquired for the company at Les Hannepés in Bouzy and Les Crupots in Ambonnay, provide the Pinot Noir. René Lalou lived to the age of 96, a fact that makes us think of the wonderful contribution of champagne to youthfulness and longevity!

This *cuvée* was made only nine times between 1966 and 1985, and it has now been re-instated, along with Mumm's recovered reputation. Because the wine is made in a vintage year, it does change in character depending on the vintage, so it is wise to check the Mumm website for the current blend and tasting notes. Whatever the year, the wine is impressive, with power, evolving complexity in the glass, concentration and creamy mousse.

Cattier Premier Cru Brut NV

25% Chardonnay, 40% Pinot Noir, 35% Meunier

The grapes for this wine are sourced from Chigny-Les-Roses, *échelle des crus* 94%. The blend comprises wines from three vintages. It is an amber gold colour with copious effervescence. Floral and apple aromas join with a hint of citrus fruit to produce an inviting tasting. On the palate, there's a balance of freshness and vinosity, with dried fruit and brioche flavours. It has a long, crisp finish.

J. Lassalle Cuvée Préférence Premier Cru Chigny-Les-Roses Brut NV

25% Chardonnay, 15% Pinot Noir, 60% Meunier

Also from the village of Chigny-Les-Roses, this wine is golden in colour, with beautiful complexity evident with aromas and flavours of red fruits, plus dried flowers, apricots and caramel from its four years' lees contact, and its five years of reserve wines evolving with a touch of orange. Medium-bodied, balanced, dry, refreshing and long on the palate, the fruitiness is very enjoyable.

Devaux Grande Réserve Brut NV

30% Chardonnay, 70% Pinot Noir

The *échelle des crus* is not disclosed, but most of the fruit is from what was designated the 80% *échelle des crus* Aube area. A portion (10–20%) is fermented in oak barrels with the balance in stainless steel

tanks, followed by malolactic fermentation. The champagne is then aged for a minimum of three years on lees. The Chardonnay from both the Aube and the Côte des Blancs gives lively finesse to the blend, which is dominated by Pinot Noir, bringing fruitiness and a long finish. Allowed to develop in the bottle, the wine will present aromas of the forest floor and an even longer finish.

Drappier Carte d'Or Brut NV

5–15% Chardonnay, 80–90% Pinot Noir, 5% Meunier

Drappier was General de Gaulle's favourite champagne House. The vineyards are geared for low yield in the Aube and the Marne, and their échelle des crus was rated 80%. Drappier uses a water press to ensure a very soft pressing. The juice is then gravity fed into the fermentation tanks, to preserve fruit quality and reduce the risk of over-oxygenation. Fermentation is cool and long in various-sized stainless steel vats, sufficient for over 75 different crus, which help make the blend, together with some wines fermented in barrel. Reserve wines are stored in barrels, using a solera system that was begun in 2006.

The result is supple, fresh champagne with floral aromas. Flavours and fragrance develop with white peach, gentle spice, apricots and red fruits. The finish is long and vinous. Allowed to mature, the wine will develop notes of gingerbread, preserved fruits and Viennese pastries. The rich golden label matches the colour of the champagne in the bottle.

Champagne	Échelle des Crus	Your Preference
Taittinger Prélude	Grand Cru - 100%	
Mumm Cuvée René Lalou	Grand Cru - 100%	
Cattier Brut	Premier Cru - 94%	
J. Lassalle Cuvée Préférence Chigny-Les-Roses Brut	Premier Cru - 94%	
Devaux Grande Réserve	Was rated 80%	
Drappier Carte d'Or	Was rated 80%	

Do your preferences match the échelle des crus rating of the description?

Of the first pair, which do you prefer?

Of the second pair, which do you prefer?

Of the third pair, which do you prefer?

Do you think that there is a quality difference between Group 2 and Group 3?

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Describe your favourite champagne in your words – appearance, aromas, flavour, texture

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Which is your least favourite, and why?

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» The list of villages and the *échelle des crus* rating appears in the Appendix of the book.

» *Terroir*: the environment in which grapes are grown.

ENDNOTES

1. Christine Cuperly, Laurence Lehoux, Valérie Quaireau, ed., *Le Guide Hachette des Vins 2012*, Hachette Livre, Paris, 2012.