

CHAMPAGNE & SPARKLING WINE

Over 2 billion bottles of sparkling wine are made in the world each year, but only about 300 million of these are made in that magical place known as Champagne. It is a small demarcated region in Northern France about an hours drive from Paris.

Only wine from this small area is allowed to be labelled "Champagne". The special status of the district depends upon a unique series of circumstances that have made the region the most outstandingly well suited in the world to the production of sparkling wines. Apart from the cool conditions, the special chalky soil with Belimnite chalk in the Grand Cru vineyards is the foremost explanation for the superiority of the district compared to its rivals.

There are three main grape varieties grown in Champagne. Almost 40% of all vines planted are Pinot Noir, with Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay both around 30%. Over and above these three classic types, less than half a percent is devoted to Arbanne, Petit Meslier, Gamay, Fromenteau, En Fume and Pinot Blanc.

There are 19,000 growers in Champagne, but only about 4,700 of these sell under their own labels. Truth be known, over half of these would actually get their wines made within a co-operative. The actual number of growers who actually grow, vinify, ferment and bottle their own wines would be around 2000. Champagne houses only own 12% of the vineyards in Champagne – they buy the majority of their grape needs from growers. One reason why I have chosen to focus strongly on the small grower/producers is because I believe they represent the best value for money and the most "true" product available. In most cases the person who grows the grapes, also crushes them and lovingly bottles them. Not to mention decides on the dosage, the way the label should look and name of the wines and anything else personally related to it. Often it is a family run operation.

NOT CHAMPAGNE

N.V. Varichon & Clerc Brut (Savoie, France) (200ml)

\$16

A bright pale yellow colour with fine and persistent bubbles. The nose is fresh and inviting with delicate aromas of ripe yellow apple, melon and pear overlaid by hints of opulent acacia flowers and the light fragrance of leavening dough. Beautiful.

2017 Vinea Marson Prosecco (Heathcote, Victoria)

\$45

These guys are some of our favourite local wine makers, Third generation Italian father and daughter team based in Heathcote. An alluring nose of ripe pear, fresh green apple with light notes of lemon pith. A touch drier than previous vintages, the kicks off with crisp acidity of zesty lemon, followed by nutty flavours and a yeasty complexity, a rich mouth-feel as a result from the addition of Pinot bianco All rounding out in a hint of bitterness.

N.V. Babo (Friuli, Italy)

\$49

It's always good to have a classic in your repertoire whether it be a cocktail, a beer or in this case a classic expression of a wine. Crisp line of acid balanced with a firm fruit drive and a super moreish dry finish.

N.V. Prince Estivac (Alsace, France)

\$42

Equal parts Pinot Blanc and Riesling made in Methode Traditionelle make this a suuuuuper drinkable fizz. Upfront citrus, bright orchid fruit and acid from the riesling meets serious mid-palate weight from the Pinot Blanc with eleven months on lees for texture and some light spice, you really cant go wrong.

2018 Dhiaga Gewurtztraminer (Great western, Victoria)

\$45

Gewürztraminer by name but not what you might expect by nature. Fruit sourced from Hently. Wild yeast ferment in bottle a la Petillante (Method Ancestral) resulting in some fairly gnarly looking yeast sediment. But fear not the monster at the bottom of the bottle as this is anything but scary. Super drinkable sparkling fun. Won gold and best sparkling wine at the 2018 Australian Alternative Varieties Wine Show.

N.V. Jo Ladron Atmospheres (Loire Valley, France)

\$62

Ladron also crafts this brilliant value méthode traditionnelle, that he calls Cuvée Atmosphères. It's a hand-harvested, naturally fermented, low dosage bubbles that shows up many a conventional and big name Champagne for both quality and value. Having found Muscadet's Melon de Bourgogne unsuitable for sparkling wine, Jo uses a hand-harvested blend of Folle Blanche and a little Chardonnay. The aromatics are just lovely, delicate, floral, with a white stone and white peach character. A very gentle palate follows, showing some lightly honeyed fruit cast against a mineral background and a fine pétillance too.

*"I could not live without Champagne. In victory I deserve it.
In defeat I need it."*

-Winston Churchill

CHAMPAGNE

N.V. Lanson Black label brut (375ml)

\$59

A very consistent style of Champagne. Excellent, creamy mousse. Very fine, persistent bead, with delicate flavours of yeast lees, cashew and citrus. The palate has very good weight, with creamy texture. Flavours of biscuit, lees, toast and citrus emerge. Clean, balanced acid finish. Aftertaste of toast, yeast lees followed by a hint of flor fino.

2009 Savart Dame De Coeur Cuvée de Prestige

\$215

A prestige 100% Chardonnay delight, fully vinified in barrel with a straining intensity and class. Dense & concentrated, yet with a racy spine of acidity. Quite brilliant, but still young. In 2014/15 I'd recommend drinking in wine glasses to help it open up and shine.

2012 Agrapart & Fils Minéral Grand Cru Extra Brut (Disg. Mar 19)

\$250

Although Agrapart isn't super well known, mostly due to the sparing amount of wine produced annually, it's a grower Champagne at the top of its game. Pascal Agrapart's wines are currently at the very top of the grower tree and get the same, coveted, three-star rating in La Revue du vin de France's Le guide des meilleurs vins de France the same rating granted to Selosse, Egly and Krug and only nine Champagne estates in total. Solid effort for a bloke only knocking out some 6000 cases a year. Terroirs is produced from only great sites and is 100% grand cru. The fruit comes from four villages in the Côte des Blancs: Avize, Cramant, Oger, and Oiry. The vines average 40 years old, and Agrapart uses 50% reserve wine and 50% barrel for this cuvée.

The wine spends up to 48 months on lees and dosage is limited to 5g/l. Disgorgement is carried out by hand and to order, roughly 2 months before collection. A heap of freshness, lemon and tangy grapefruit zest with notes of fresh almonds and white flowers. Disgorged March 2019. **Minéral** is blended from two adjacent vieilles vignes plots (50+ years old) of similar, chalky, Grand Cru soils on the border between Avize and Cramant. The fruit from Le Champ Boutons in Avize is fermented in tank, while the component from Bionnes in Cramant is vinified in 600-litre oak casks. Dosage is 3 g/L and the wine has spent some 70 months on lees. This is always the saltiest, racy, mineral wine in the Agrapart range and the 2012 is simply a blinder, as you might expect from such a great vintage. Fans of this wine should not hesitate. In a few years, with time on cork, it will be even greater.

N.V. Larmandier-Bernier Longitude Brut (Base 14. Disg. Sep 2018)

\$142

2013 base with 35-40% reserve wines going back to 2004, disgorged in September 2017. The name here refers to the 'vertical' nature of the geographic locations of the vineyards as well as the style of wine that results from the very chalky soils of these sites - that gift a more linear, mineral style of wine. To be specific, the vineyards are located in Cramant, Avize, Oger, and Vertus (north of the village). Connecting the dots between these communes forms a line close to the fourth meridian. So, Longitude. Longitude is all about minerality, line and raciness. This is again 100% Côte des Blancs Chardonnay, yet now the vineyards are all north of the village of Vertus, where the top soils are much thinner and the vine's roots plunge straight into the chalk bedrock. Expect a vibrant, crystalline and remarkably refined Champagne, crackling with chalky energy and salinity and with wonderfully bright, citrus, nectarine and white pepper fruit. Apricot, chamomile, hazelnut and lightly honeyed overtones fill out the wine's ample frame effortlessly. Longitude is dosed with a low four grams per litre (so Extra Brut).

N.V. Laherte Freres Ultadition Extra Brut (Base 16. Disg. Oct 2018)

\$120

The ripples created by the young Aurélien Laherte, since he joined his family's Estate in 2002 have now crashed ashore as waves. Most of the Estate is biodynamically farmed with the exception of those vineyards that are too far away to do so (mainly those in the Côte des Blancs and the Marne Valley). These latter sites are still managed organically, with the soils cultivated and no herbicides or pesticides used. Ultadition is a blend of 60% Pinot Meunier, 30% Chardonnay and 10% Pinot Noir from a total of seven villages across the Côteaux Sud d'Épernay and Vallée de la Marne. Naturally fermented in a mixture of vessels (wooden tronconique casks, old barrique, foudre and steel). The wines are vinified separately and kept on lees with the malolactic fermentation only partially completed. Dosage for Australia's bottling is also particularly low at only 4 grams Per litre. Sculpted and very nicely balanced, Lemon confit, white pepper, chalk and mint all poised in this wonderful state of tension. A super-classy offering from Laherte Frères.

CHAMPAGNE CONT..

N.V. Vouette et Sorbée Blanc d'Argile Blanc de Blancs (Base 14. Disg. Oct 2017)

\$220

Within the cold, west-facing Biaunes lieu-dit there is a small parcel of Chardonnay (the Côtes des Bar is overwhelmingly planted to Pinot Noir) that Gautherot planted wild, without preparing the soils, amongst the native vegetation. Established in 2000, with massale cuttings from Anselme Selosse and from Dauvissat's Valmur grand cru vineyard, this portion of the vineyard is now the origin of what Antonio Galloni calls "one of the most beautiful and distinctive wines in Champagne." The vines here yield only 15-20 hl/ha each year - one of the keys to the quality and intensity on offer. Fermentation is wild and has traditionally taken place a mix of Burgundian pièce and 400-litre fût, purchased from vigneron friends in Burgundy. The new vintages now include a portion of fruit fermented and raised in Georgian amphora. As with the Fidèle, this wine spent roughly 15 months in bottle, sur lees, before being disgorged by hand (zero dosage) in October 2016. It's a super mineral, nutty wine with crunchy stone fruits. There is lovely, pulpy fruit but also racy, crunchy acidity and terrific length with a twist of pleasant astringency. It takes you (the 60 miles) to grand cru Chablis and back again.

N.V. Chartogne-Taillet Les Orizeaux Blanc de Noirs (disg 2017 bottled with 3.5 g/l dosage)

\$190

Some like it rich and spicy! We love champagne that shows great expression, poise and energy. This 100% Pinot noir is from a single vineyard site called 'Les Orizeaux' located just north of Reims and displays all these wonderful oyster-shell like salinity, nervy citrus and overlaid with delicate spice and vanilla. This cuvée is full-bodied and flavourful yet it retains a high level of finesse. 'Les Orizeaux' vineyard is sand over chalk bedrock and was planted in 1961. Older vines produce less fruit, yet with more concentration and intensity. Vinified and aged in French oak barrels

N.V. Egly - Ouriet Brut Tradition Champagne Grand Cru (from the '12, '11 and '10 vintages, disgorged October '17)

\$199

The Ambonnay based Egly-Ouriet are a reference point for grower producers in Champagne worldwide, known for their impeccable vineyard management and fastidious winemaking skills. Much of their production is raised in oak barrels, with extended aging on lees a feature. Brut Tradition is a blend of up to 70% Pinot Noir and 30% Chardonnay from low yielding vines in Grand Cru terroirs, and is a wine that puts to shame many a prestige cuvee at double the price. Exceptionally fine bead. Superb aromatics of baked bread and yeast lees meld with subtle honeyed notes, pear, citrus and lightly roasted cashew. Very faint hazelnut end notes complete a complex sniff. Rich toasty baked bread and yeast lees characters pair with subtle pear and citrus flavours. Refined lacy feel with sculptured acidity lending tension on the mouth watering finish. Also evident are cashew and buttered brioche nuances. Long creamy oily baked bread and yeast lees tinged finish with a bite of refreshing citrus.