

WINE News

In the cellars of Champagne.



FEBRUARY 1, 2016 FEATURES

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We are Going to Champagne!

By Gary Westby

Our team here at K&L travels tirelessly to get you the best bottles, and as I am writing this I am also planning an early spring trip to Champagne. This will be my twenty-seventh visit to the region. My main business there will be to taste the 2015 vintage before bottling, and all the current releases, but I am certain I will be treated to a few special older bottles, as well. If you feel like treating yourself to some older bottles, we just received a tiny allocation of every vintage from 1991 through 2009 (yes, 19 vintages!) of Champagne Louise Brison. You can read all about that, starting on this page (below). I will also be visiting craft Champagne master Alex Le Brun, whose wine inspired Kyle Kurani to write his article in these pages; Franck Bonville in Avize, written up here

by Mari Keilman; and Billecart-Salmon, also discussed on page 2. Ryan Woodhouse has answered the question, “What do you wine pros drink?” and I am flattered that the answer is Champagne! If you are considering traveling to Champagne yourself, I would love to help. I have already helped a few hundred customers with information on the region, and you should be the next to go! Drop me a line at garywestby@klwines.com and ask to be put on my mailing list while you are at it. I will send you a long list of hotels, restaurants and producer contacts, as well as links to maps and sample itineraries by Champagne subregion. Being on my list will be the best way to find out about the soon-to-be-released 2002 Krug Brut Champagne and other sought-after rarities.

Louise Brison, Vintage Champagne Specialist

By Gary Westby

Francis and Delphine Brulez have a clear vision for their domaine, Louise Brison. Like many producers in Burgundy, they look back to the past to find inspiration for the future. They are working without agrochemicals or additives in their Champagnes, with small yields, an old Coquard basket press and small oak barrels. All of the fruit comes from their own 15 hectare, organic estate. In short, they are doing everything the hard, expensive way to ensure the best possible quality.

The estate sits at the crossroads of three villages in the Aube department: Noé-les-Mallets, Chacenay and Essoyes at 900 feet of elevation, and enjoys a pretty consistent south-southeast exposure. Like most of the Aube, the soil here is the same as in Chablis: Kimmeridgian clay. The climate is much more continental than in the Marne area where

most Champagne is produced, with both colder winters and warmer summers. This makes it easy to ripen Pinot Noir, which is the dominant grape variety in the area. Chardonnay is difficult to grow here, as it is often the victim of spring frost, and only represents a small portion (one-fifth) of the estate. The rest is Pinot Noir from vines averaging 35 years of age.

Last year, the 2008 vintage from Brison sold so fast that it “broke” the internet—our site could not handle the business! We just received the 2009, and it is even better.

2009 Louise Brison Vintage Brut Champagne (\$29.99)

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Louise Brison

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is composed of half Chardonnay, entirely barrel fermented, and one-half Pinot Noir that was fermented in two-thirds stainless steel and one-third barrel. This Champagne has perfect texture, medium body and a spectacular bead of compact streamers. It has aromas and flavors of cream, nuts and white fruit, and a very detailed, mineral-driven finish. It finishes quite dry, but I would never guess how little sugar has been added—only three grams per liter! The warm, ripe 2009 vintage had all of the sugar that the wine needed, naturally.

I think the biggest advertisement for acquiring a quantity of the 2009 is how well the older bottles show. We just received a case each of every vintage since 1991—ranging in price from \$199 a bottle for the oldest to \$39.99 per bottle for the younger vintages. I drank the **1995 (\$99.00)** at dinner with Delphine and Francis at the domaine, and a bottle of the **1996 (\$99.00)** at home with Cinnamon upon my return. They were both spectacular, and had just started to show some of the brioche and brassy intrigue that we love old Champagne for. This stuff is built for the long haul! We also received a small amount of the dry, full-flavored **Louise Brison “L’Impertinente” Brut Rosé Champagne (\$39.99)** as well as the last of the 2008, now just in half bottles. Although not labeled as such, the **Louise Brison “La Mignonne” Brut Champagne (375ml \$16.99)** is all 2008, the exact same juice that was in the 750s last year.

A toast to you!



Delphine and Francis Brulez, in their vineyard in Noé-Les-Mallets.

Antoine Roland-Billecart, King of Refreshment

By Gary Westby

Of all of the big names in Champagne, there is only one that can be called the king of refreshment: Antoine Roland-Billecart of Champagne Billecart-Salmon. He and his brother François are the sixth generation owners of this great house. Their grandfather came from a beer brewing background, and pioneered the use of very cold,



The man behind the bottle: Antoine Billecart pouring at the K&L tasting bar in Redwood City.

very long alcoholic fermentations in Champagne. They still lead the way with these cold fermentations, a process that yields very precise, pure, refreshing base wines that turn into scintillating Champagne. Antoine is not interested in Champagne that is heavy, and feels that the drinker should always want another glass. The **Billecart-Salmon “Brut Reserve” Champagne (\$44.99)** is the best example of how the family puts refreshment in the bottle. The current batch is based on 2011 with 40%

reserves from 2010 and 2009. It is composed of 40% Meunier, 30% Chardonnay and 30% Pinot Noir, and it is that cold fermented, subtly fruity, zippy Meunier that makes the wine so special. If you like both brioche and citrus flavors in your Champagne, this is a top choice. The bottles are too easy to finish—you have been warned! We also have the ultimately elegant **Billecart-Salmon Brut Rosé Champagne (\$74.99)**, which Antoine describes as rosé for people who hate rosé. I would disagree; I would say that it is the bottle that defines rosé in Champagne!

My favorite wine that we have from Antoine is the **1999 Billecart-Salmon “Cuvée Nicolas François Billecart” NFB Brut Champagne (\$99.00)**. We are selling lots of vintage Champagne that is a full 10 years younger than this, but they have been patient so that you don’t have to be. It is composed of 60% Pinot Noir and 40% Chardonnay, and while two-thirds of the wine is made in very cold stainless steel tanks for the first fermentation, the other third is done in barrel for texture. The results are fabulous: Nutella and toast, a perfect fountain of tiny bubbles and a long, chalky finish. If you love Champagne that is refreshing and haven’t had Billecart in a while, check it out!



Franck Bonville, Fizz Farmer

By Mari Keilman

When I first started working at K&L a little under a decade ago, I was introduced to a fabulous new world of grower-producer Champagnes (also known as grower Champagnes, or with the cute moniker that an older gentleman who came in the shop last month called them, “farmer fizz”). I had already fallen in love with Champagne through my prior experiences in Napa Valley but I was only exposed to the Champagnes that were readily available, being mostly Grand Marques like Laurent-Perrier and Veuve Clicquot. When I finally had my first sips of “farmer fizz” at K&L, it coincidentally happened to be Franck Bonville, and I was instantly in love.

Grower-producer Champagnes come from estates that grow all the grapes that go into their own Champagne cuvées. The Bonville family has been a grower-producer since the early 1930s. Bonville is a fourth-generation Champagne producer that focuses solely on Grand Cru 100% Chardonnay Champagnes and farming “lutte raisonnée,” or sustainable. Being a grower-producer utilizing entirely estate-grown, quasi-organic Grand Cru Chardonnay grapes helps their Champagnes to exhibit tremendous purity, terroir and depth.

Whenever I pour Bonville for tastings, I always notice how Bonville sets itself apart from all of the other blanc de blancs producers, especially at the entry level. The quality of their estate grapes shows in the focus, structure and purity of fruit; yet their wines also display an elegant, creamy texture that keeps their Champagnes from being too linear and one-note like some other nonvintage Champagnes. Our savvy customers have caught on to this little-known fact, which is why the Bonville Champagnes like the rosé, extra brut and Belle Voyes always sell out before we receive our next shipment.

If you're unfamiliar with grower-producer Champagnes or with the Bonville Champagnes, definitely start out by tasting the **Franck Bonville Grand Cru Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne (\$34.99)**. It's crisp, refreshing, and vibrant, with just the perfect balance of citrus and acidity coupled with copious amounts of teeny tiny bubbles. Those tiny little bubbles and estate-grown Chardonnay grapes lend to the creamy texture on the palate, but what truly sets this Champagne apart is the classic Avize minerality that comes through on the finish. You won't find that in most large production Grand Marques Champagnes!



What We Drink When We Drink Champagne

By Ryan Woodhouse

“So you're in the wine business...what do you like to drink?!”

As staff members at K&L, this is a question that we hear a lot, both from customers and people outside of work. Working in the wine business, you become (like it or not) the go-to sommelier/all-around wine guru at just about every social event or family gathering you attend. It seems that people really want to know what we pour when we get home at night: with all these fine wines at our disposal (in our glamorous lives where we drink for a living—yeah, right), what's our favorite tippie? The most common answer I give (and this goes for many of my colleagues, too) is Champagne. We love the bubbly!

This answer surprises many people who expect us to list off some cult California Cab or highly limited Burgundy. Champagne for many people is only associated with celebrations: it's something to toast with, something they pop on New Years or graduation day. However, for many of us in the industry, Champagne is something that we drink at least on a weekly basis. I'm not talking Dom or Cristal here—this is not about lavish, luxury brands. This is about us drinking fresh, dynamic, complex wines that complement food and, quite frankly, cleanse our palates after assaulting them with young Bordeaux or Barolo at work. Champagne is the most versatile “food wine” I know, and something that brings me great pleasure to drink any night of the week.

Thanks to our Direct Import program here at K&L, we have a plethora of Champagnes that are not only of exceptional quality, but also priced for Tuesday night drinking! Working direct with these properties means we can cut about 50% of the cost from the traditional three tier (importer/distributor/retailer) model. Also, these small “grower-producers” don't spend millions on marketing and advertising—they focus on what's in the bottle. Their family's name is often emblazoned on the label, which says that these wines are a reflection of what they stand for, with consistent quality being the utmost consideration.

Here are a couple Champagne staples that you'll find in the fridges of most K&L employees:

Ariston Aspasie “Carte Blanche” Brut Champagne (\$27.99)

This “house wine” at K&L is a remarkable one. It delivers everything you want from Champagne, and then some. Crisp, fresh, invigorating; lovely toasty lees notes and mouthwatering acidity. It gets five years resting on the lees—that's four times the legal requirement. This overdelivers in every way.

Baron Fuente “Grande Reserve” Brut Champagne (\$23.99) I can't even fathom the economics of this Champagne. The wine contains 40% reserve wines, received three years of aging prior to release, and tastes like a \$50 bottle. But it's selling for half of that. It's vibrant, full of pure, golden orchard fruit, brioche and pie crust. Delicious!

Le Brun: Standard Bearer

By Kyle Kurani

Alexandre Le Brun is one of the smallest producers that we carry, but makes such high-quality wines that he is quickly becoming the standard to which I compare other bottles. This was something of a subconscious development: After trying each offering and falling head over heels for them, they began to establish themselves as reference points to which I measure every other Champagne that I taste. These are some of the best Champagnes that you can try, period.

His stunning quality results from a mixture of incredible vineyards that produce some of the best grapes in the region, coupled with a deep-seated passion for winemaking that borders on obsessive.

Alexandre is a small grower. Seven acres is the total amount of vineyard that he owns—my aunt and uncle have more pasture for their 10 sheep in Auburn that he does to grow grapes. In the case of Le Brun this is perfect: from nose to tail (vine to bottle may be a bit better) he has a very high degree of contact in every step of the winemaking process. These seven acres include the oldest vines that I have ever heard of in Champagne, planted 103 years ago.

All of Le Brun's cuvées, with the exception of Tradition, are less than one press load worth of wine—we got a whopping 60 bottles of his rosé for the entire country. They make fleeting appearances on our shelves here, and I often blow my Champagne budget for the month on them, because I know I have to stock up if I am going to survive until the next batch lands stateside.



Alex Le Brun in one of his Meunier vineyards in Monthelon.



2007 Alexandre Le Brun “Cuvée Fascination” Blanc de Blancs Brut Champagne (\$69.99) When tasting a Blanc de Blancs, this is now what I think of. It is the height of what Chardonnay can accomplish: chalky minerality, veins of quartz and limestone run through the glass, followed by fresh baguette, perfectly ripe orchard fruit, and a hint of pastry dough just at the end.

2009 Alexandre Le Brun “Cuvée Revelation” Brut Champagne (\$79.99) Top of the mark for what 100% Pinot Meunier can accomplish in a bottle of Champagne. An almost sherry-like lees quality adds complexity and depth to this Blanc de Noirs that is almost unrivaled.

Alexandre Le Brun “Passion” Brut Champagne (\$49.99) My dark horse favorite of his lineup. I don't throw the “K word” around lightly, but this is very much a poor man's Krug. Opulent, decadent, full of yeast, brioche and a beautifully aged characteristic that can only be achieved with extended lees aging, eight years in this case.

2008 Alexandre Le Brun “Cuvée Dilection” Brut Rosé Champagne (\$99.99) Impossibly elegant, practically awe-inspiring, this is the high-water mark for rosé in the Champagne department. Red wine from 100-year-old vines gives it perfect texture and weight. Seamless from start to finish.

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