

WINE News

Great Champagne at great prices?
It's no riddle.



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Always More to Explore in Champagne

By Gary Westby

Champagne is a good-sized area with about double the vineyard of the Napa Valley. I have been exploring it for 16 years, and even though I leave for my twenty-eighth visit to the area in June, there is still so much to learn and discover. It is full of subregions, and in this newsletter we will visit many of them.

Scott Beckerley explores the Aube, on the border with Burgundy, in his article; Mari takes us to the pure chalk vineyards of the Côte des Blancs; Kyle, into the heart of Reims; and I go to the “other” side of Epernay. Many of the gems we find never make it into these pages or

onto the shelf. If you are a big Champagne fan, please send me an email at garywestby@klwines.com and ask to be on my personal list. This will give you first crack at wines like the 2002 Krug, as well as incredible values on tiny production Champagne.

Speaking of incredible value, I’ll start on the western outskirts of Epernay, as far from the “Avenue de Champagne” as you can go and still be in the city. Champagne Charles Ellner has been in this unexplored part of Epernay for three generations, and their top-notch Champagnes are my best find so far in 2016.

Charles Ellner “Carte d’Or” Brut Champagne (\$34.99)

Like all of the bottles from Ellner listed here, this is all estate. It is composed of 75% Chardonnay and 25% Pinot Noir and has great toast, super fine bubbles and plush texture from over five years of aging on the lees. If you like your Champagne rich but dry, this is a top-notch bottle and a must-try.



Charles Ellner “Premier Cru” Brut Champagne (\$39.99)

This Champagne is composed of the same grape varieties and aged for the same amount of time as the Carte d’Or, but restricted to the premier cru sites owned by the family. It is a nutty, complex Champagne with tight, tiny streamers from long aging, and great acidity from chalky sites and no malolactic fermentation.



2004 Charles Ellner “Prestige” Brut Champagne (\$49.99)

This Champagne drinks like a great blanc de blancs for a reason: it is 70% Chardonnay from the grand cru of Chouilly and from one of the greatest Chardonnay harvests of the young century. The rest is old vine Pinot Noir from Tauxieres and Epernay, all done without malolactic. This is stunning, long, refreshing Champagne!





Jean-Felix Josselin of Champagne Josselin in his vineyard in Gyé-sur-Seine.

The Aube: A History of Surprises

By Scott Beckerley

Perhaps the most exciting Champagne region right now in the store is the Aube. Not that the Marne Valley or the Côte des Blancs are slacking, by any means—it's just that more and more wines from this region are now coming into the U.S. market.

We have long carried the wines of Champagne Fleury, a customer favorite for many years. These are now joined by the re-emergence in the U.S. market of Champagne Drappier, and our newest arrivals of Champagne Louise Brison (which has been a huge success here since its introduction last year), Champagne Jean-Jacques Lamoureux, and Champagne Jean Josselin.

The Aube region is not without its drama. Parts of it have been taken over by Burgundy and then back again by Champagne over the past few hundred years. The Aube was formally established as a “department” in 1790 and became a region of Champagne in 1927 after a 16-year fight by grape growers to establish it as such. During the nineteenth century, it was famous for its hosiery (textiles are still produced, but in decline) and its main crop (to this day) is hemp. Grapes are the second-largest agricultural good, among potatoes, cereal, beets, cabbage and “medicinal” poppies (might have to look for the latter if and when I visit the region).



Charline Drappier pouring the Grande Sendrée.

Champagne Drappier, based in Urville, was established in 1808. Their famous, orange-labeled **Drappier “Carte d’Or” Brut Champagne (750ml \$39.99; 1.5L \$89.99)** was first released in 1952, while their first **Brut Rosé (\$54.99)** was released in 1968. The majority of their wines are Pinot Noir-based, rich, full and round. They are also delicious and perfect for meal pairing. My particular favorite is the **Drappier “Grande Sendrée” Brut Champagne (\$99.00)**. It is elegant, with stone fruit and citrus flavors, toasted nuts, and a light smokiness. Drappier also produces the wonderful no-dosage **Brut Nature Blanc de Noirs (\$49.99)**, **Brut Nature Rosé (\$54.99)** and the highly acclaimed **Drappier “Charles de Gaulle” Brut Champagne (\$69.99)**. What sets Drappier apart is the fine acidity and minerality that are present in their wines.

Two of our newest acquisitions from the Aube are the small estate producers Jean Josselin and Louise Brison. Jean Josselin is located in Gyé-sur-Seine, where the vineyards were acquired by the family in 1854. The year 1957 saw their first vintage. They are an independent winemaker, with Jean Pierre Josselin in charge, taking over from his father. The wines are characterized by intense minerality and cleanliness. White fruits abound in the **Jean Josselin “Cordon Royal” Brut (\$39.99)**, while the **“Alliance” (\$39.99)** has firm acidity reminiscent of a classic Chablis. Both of these are Pinot Noir-dominated.

The **“Audace” Brut Rosé (\$49.99)** is all Pinot Noir and has gracious strawberry fruit, definite savory notes and, like its sister wines, a very clean finish.

Many of you are familiar with the **Louise Brison Brut**, formerly a 2008 and now a **2009 vintage (\$29.99)**, which is a super bargain. The 2008 was rich with caramel and golden apples. The 2009 has white stone fruits, crème fraîche and a mineral-driven finish. The dosage is very low at three grams per liter! We also have vintages from **1991 (\$199.00)**, which is full and rich with mushroom and chalk notes, to the **2007 (\$39.99)**, which has wood, almonds and a Madeira edge. I loved the **1992 (\$199.00)**, which shows a strongly scented nose of roasted nuts, with baked yellow apples on the palate, background flavors of passion fruit, and a very long finish, with lively acidity. Each has its own unique characteristics and all are quite different. Louise Brison is named for the grandmother of the family and they are located in Noé-les-Mallets. The 1991 vintage was their first release, they have been organic since 2012, and have a total of just 13 hectares. Their blends are either 50/50 Chardonnay and Pinot Noir or 60/40 Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

Longue vie à l’Aube!



Michel Drappier in his vineyards in Urville.

Grand Crus of the Côte des Blancs: Launois and Bonville

By Mari Keilman

Champagne is awe-inspiring, remarkable and astonishing, is it not? What other wine or wine region is as versatile, resilient and as adaptable as Champagne? Not only did the region have to endure numerous years of war, but Champagne has had to understand and master the art of effervescence while also adapting a marginal climate. Today, what is being produced in Champagne is as versatile as the region itself. Champagne can be drunk in its youth as a fun, lively celebratory refresher that's perfect for toasting. In its adolescent phase, Champagne can be enjoyed as the perfect pairing to almost any meal. And when given the proper time to age, Champagne transforms into an ethereal and transcendent wine that rivals the greatest.

While Champagne is composed of several distinct regions, the most resilient region is the Côte des Blancs. Named after the white grape variety Chardonnay that dominates this region, the 30-mile ridge that runs between Cuis and Bergères-lès-Vertus is home to some of the greatest vineyards in Champagne.



Bernard Launois stealing from his barrels in Mesnil.

While some might feel that Chardonnay is not the most interesting grape as a still wine, it comes alive and reveals itself as a noble variety in the Côte des Blancs. After hundreds of years of observation, it was noted that Chardonnay flourished in the Côte des Blancs due to the marginal climate and limestone subsoil, conditions unfavorable for Pinot Noir and Meunier. The presence of the chalky soil forces the roots of the Chardonnay grape to work hard in order to draw up any existing water, thereby stressing the vines just enough to produce ideal grapes and imparting the signature Côte des Blancs minerality. The borderline cool temperatures (averaging 50 degrees Fahrenheit) and barely adequate hours of sunlight lead to Chardonnay grapes that achieve a delicate balance of acidity, phenolic ripeness, and aromatic complexity—and wines of finesse and elegance.

Franck Bonville and Launois, two of our own Direct Import producers, have been able to capitalize on the marginal climate in the Côte des Blancs to produce some of the most interesting and noteworthy blanc des blancs in Champagne.

Champagne Launois has always been one of the purest examples of Côte des Blancs terroir. Even in their entry-level Champagnes, the evidence of adaptability is ever-present. From the first sniff of the **Launois “Cuvée Reserve” Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne (\$34.99)** the grand cru Côte des Blancs minerality is upfront and present. The Cuvée Reserve can be enjoyed in its youth, with its notes of clean chalk, bright Meyer lemon and a surprisingly long finish of toasted brioche.



The **2006 Launois “Spécial Club” Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne (\$59.99)** is like taking the best of both worlds from the Cuvée Reserve and Quartz. Loaded with tons of stone fruit, chalky texture, brioche, apple, spiced pear and caramelized citrus, the Special Club exemplifies how generations of adaptation result in a cuvée that can compete with the biggest Champagne houses.

For four generations, the Franck Bonville family has specialized in blanc de blancs. The **Franck Bonville Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs Brut (\$34.99)** is crisp, refreshing and vibrant, with just the perfect balance of green apple and lime on the nose and palate. In this cuvée, the Bonvilles created an unusually creamy, full-bodied wine—for an entry-level blanc de blancs—in conjunction with a bright and zesty flavor profile. This has an elegant, harmonious balance.

While choosing to preserve the acidity and minerality in grand cru brut, the Bonvilles took a different route in showcasing the Côte des Blancs fruit in the **Franck Bonville “Belles Voyes” Brut Blanc des Blancs (\$69.99)**.

Opting to barrel ferment the juice that goes into the “Belles Voyes,” they’ve showcased the complexity that comes from the nearly 100-year-old vines. The rounded texture, due to time spent in barrel, helps to elevate the complex aromatics of Asian spice, orange zest, lemon meringue and a touch of brioche. Just like the Launois Special Club, the Bonville Belles Voyes is a tête de cuvée that can compete with the best of them, but is also a pure example of Côte des Blancs terroir.



Salty, Savory, Creamy: Cooking for Two of Champagne's Best

By Kyle Kurani

These are the three things I keep in mind when cooking a dinner to go with serious Champagne: salty, savory, creamy. Any meal that incorporates these three flavor profiles will play the perfect dance partner to the freshness and vibrancy that Champagne brings to the wine pairing partnership.



When Gary asked me to write an article about 2010 Roederer Rosé and Krug Grandé Cuvée, and how they went with food, I said it would be tough, but that I was up for the challenge.

Both of those wines are so impeccably made, and such icons of the industry, I wanted to do them justice, and share with you just how special they can make a meal. These aren't your sushi and Champagne night bottles—think of them as stand-ins for grand cru Burgundy.

Louis Roederer is consistently one of my favorite houses in Champagne. They have more hectares of biodynamic vineyards planted than any other producer, and their focus of winemaking in the vineyard as well as the cellar has created some stunning wines. As of 2007 they have a completely separate facility just for making rosé, and my goodness have the wines been great, improving each year.

The 2010 Louis Roederer Brut Rosé Champagne (\$79.99) is full of life and vibrancy. Strawberry and rhubarb, hints of almond cream, and a flinty minerality add a wonderful savory quality to the wine. With just a hint of exotic spice wafting in and out, this is really compelling rosé. It is made in a saignée style, which you can only do in Champagne if your fruit is close to perfect. The contact with the skin lends just a bit more structure and weight to the wine, making it a perfect candidate for a richer dish.



Bone-in pork chops, risotto, and sautéed spinach make up the “salty, creamy, savory” for this dinner. The pork was brined with anise, ginger, allspice and coriander to complement the spice notes in the wine, and cooked in screaming-hot cast iron to give it a lovely, salty crust. To go alongside, spinach sautéed in reduced chicken stock and white wine, and risotto finished with creamy Parmesan and fresh grated nutmeg. Rich but not heavy, all three played the perfect counterpart to an absolutely amazing bottle from Roederer. On to the next dinner we go!

Krug is fancy Champagne, really good fancy Champagne. Not only do they make one of the best non-vintage bottles you can find on the market, period—they also give Champagne lovers every bit of information about their wines as possible. ID codes on the back of every bottle of Krug “Grande Cuvée” Brut Champagne (\$149.99) bring you the full run-down of particulars in every bottle. Our bottle had 120 different wines from 10 different years, the oldest from 1988 and the youngest from 2003, and spent five years on the lees. It has an almost illicit decadence, full of brioche and pastry dough, dripping orchard fruit, sun-drenched apricots, rich but vibrant, mineral and supple all at the same time. Now to find a dish to live up to that pedigree!



I wanted to do something out of the ordinary, something celebratory. I landed on rabbit with creamy, truffled polenta and butter-braised squash. Back to my trusty brine, this time with more classic French flavors: juniper, allspice, bay leaf, garlic and cloves, all to add richness without overpowering the delicate meat. Next to it, some creamy polenta finished with a little too much parmigiano and truffle oil to really drive home the savory quality and match it with the decadence of the Krug. And finally, some simply braised mini squash, mostly to make me feel better. See? We had a vegetable!

I certainly don't eat this well every week—I might explode—however, I hope this gives you some ideas on how to incorporate some of the best wines made in the world with your wine dinners. Bringing a bottle of Champagne from the cocktail hour into the dining room gives you not only the chance to drink Champagne, it also can add an entirely new layer of enjoyment to dinner. Happy drinking!

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