

Jancis Robinson



'Growers' champagnes, being identified with all this tech spec and with a real live individual attached, have much more of a story to tell'

Brave new bubbly

Young Cyril Janison was not going to bother to come to London to present his champagnes at a tasting last month. "I decided to come only yesterday," he confessed, pouring me a taste of Conges 2006 made from Pinot Meunier, grown in the vineyard behind his house in Epernay. "But when I saw who was here I decided I should come." He nodded admiringly at the other 14 producers gathered in Vintners' Hall, all busy introducing the clients of Berry Bros & Rudd to a quite different sort of champagne.

Although long a fixture in French homes, champagne from small-scale vine growers, rather than from world-famous brand owners, is a relatively new phenomenon on export markets. The wines have many advantages. Their traceability and ability to express a particular vintage, village or even vineyard – rather than being blended into a consistent house style – chimes with the zeitgeist. Most of these growers produce an intriguing range of diverse wines – unlike the typical big champagne house that may make only large volumes of a non-vintage blend, a vintage-dated champagne and a rosé. Such diversity is catnip for wine enthusiasts, even if potentially more demanding for those charged with selling the wines.

Growers are more ready than most of the big houses to supply full details of their wines. Back labels of growers' champagnes are often liberally printed with the principal vintage(s) in a non-dated blend, exact provenance of the grapes, whether any oak was used in its ageing, the date it was disgorged (when the sediment of the second, fizz-inducing fermentation in bottle is expelled) and the residual sugar or so-called dosage (getting lower all the time).

So growers' champagnes, being identified with all this tech spec and, what's more, with a real live individual attached, have much more of a story to tell. Another advantage has been that, with minimal marketing budgets, they have tended to be markedly less expensive than the well-known brands. It seems to me, however, that growers' champagnes have been getting more expensive recently – in the UK anyway. Exchange rate movements surely mean that the wines should have been getting cheaper? Perhaps British merchants are finding them easier to sell



CURRENT FAVOURITE GROWERS' CHAMPAGNES

Except where stated, most are imported into the UK by Vine Trail (0117 921 1770; vinetrail.co.uk)

- Agrapart, L'Avizoise Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut Grand Cru 2008
- Raphael et Vincent Bérèche, Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut Premier Cru 2008
- Bonnaire, Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru 2005 (€145.98 per six bottles in bond, Berry Bros & Rudd)
- Chartogne-Taillet, Orizeaux Extra Brut 2009
- La Closerie, Les Béguines Extra Brut NV
- Ulysse Collin, Les Roises Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut NV
- René Geoffroy, Extra Brut 2004
- Jacquesson, Cuvée 738 Extra Brut NV (€366.72 per six bottles in bond, Berry Bros & Rudd)

- Janisson Baradon, Grand Réserve
- Laherte Frères, Les 7 Extra Brut NV
- Guy Larmandier, Cuvée Signe François Vieilles Vignes Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru 2007
- Larmandier-Bernier, Longitude Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut Premier Cru (€33.75 Lea & Sandeman)
- R&L Legras, Présidence Vieilles Vignes Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru 2007
- Marguet Père et Fils, Elements 10 Extra Brut Grand Cru NV
- Marguet Père et Fils, Sapience Extra Brut 2007
- Eric Rodez, Blanc de Noirs
- Eric Rodez, Cuvée des Grands Vintages (based on 2007)
- De Sousa, Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru NV (€163.98 per six bottles in bond, Berry Bros & Rudd)

so are now seeking a higher margin than when they were introducing them to a bemused public much more used to the big names.

Vine Trail and The Sampler were some of the first merchants to bring growers' champagnes here but the fact that both of the rival St James's traditional merchants, Justerini & Brooks and Berry Bros & Rudd, have got in on the act suggests they are no longer considered niche products. In his written introduction to the company's offer of "artisan champagne", Berrys' buyer Simon Field even drew a parallel with the transformation of Burgundy from being dominated by negociants to the pre-eminence of individual domaines. "Champagne is now in the same position as Burgundy was 20 years ago, at the dawn of a brave new world of diversity."

The most intense among Berrys' "small growers" (not necessarily physically diminutive) is Eric Rodez, whose wines are also sold by Gauntley Wine of Nottingham, The Sampler and Bottle Apostle. Bald and wearing bright blue spectacles, he says he was taught "the rigour of blending" when he worked with Henri Krug, and learnt the importance of expressing the soil from arch-terroirist Marcel Deiss of Alsace. He assured me that "today we're in a world of fools. For the last 25 years, I've been free whereas my contemporaries are locked into the old ways. I seek minerality, and I'm free to ask questions all the time." He deliberately adds very little sulphur, like the natural wine brigade, ages most wines in oak, and is fastidious about using only grape concentrate rather than beet sugar for the final dosage of his substantial wines.

Champagne is not a wine region with an impeccable reputation for sustainability. Indeed, an American wine writer friend of mine, used to the healthy vineyards of the Napa Valley, visited Champagne for the first time this spring and declared himself "shocked" by the state of vineyards there. Biodynamic viticulture, now popular in many wine regions of the world, is essayed by only a handful of Champagne growers, notably Fleury Père et Fils and Louis Roederer.

I asked Cyril Janisson whether he thought vineyard health was improving. "I hope so," he said. "I think the younger generation are doing better things. The vines certainly look greener and better than they did 10 or 20 years ago. In Champagne we have the money to make improvements so we need to invest." ▶



Chartogne-Taillet's basic **Cuvée Ste Anne** (£25, The Wine Society) is one of the best-value grower's champagnes, with modest residual sugar of 5g/l. The youthful current blend is based on 2012 and should come into its prime next year.

◀ Next to him was Jean-Baptiste Geoffroy, who told me proudly about his own recent investment in the family business, René Geoffroy. He used to be based in the village of Cumières but in 2008 was able to buy the premises in Aÿ of the old Collet co-op. He showed me pictures of the handsome house and courtyard on his iPad and I asked whether he had had to cripple himself with debt. "It was the price of a small flat in London." He laughed. "Besides, I have five daughters, so I needed the room."

Noticing various well-thumbed London guides on the tasting tables, and noting Simon Field's comment afterwards about how "bemused" his Champenois guests had been by the dinner he organised for them at Hixter Bankside in an old tin-box factory by Tate Modern, I couldn't help registering how different this group of producers was from the corporate crowd that turns up at the grand annual generic tasting of champagne in London.

There is real charm to many of the wines but be warned that the letters RM, for *récoltant-manipulant*, on a champagne label are no shortcut to quality. There are 16,000 growers in Champagne and only a few are also gifted winemakers. Perhaps the safest shortcut to quality would be to attend the series of tastings now held by various producer groups in Champagne every April and taste for yourself. **FT**

Tasting notes on Purple Pages of JancisRobinson.com
Stockists from wine searcher.com



Solana's royal de foie

Five of the best Family-run restaurants in Spain

Can't get a booking at the recently crowned World's Best Restaurant – the Roca brothers' El Celler de Can Roca in Girona? Try these Michelin-starred family affairs instead, suggests Trish Lorenz

Casa Gerardo

Marcos Morán – also the gastronomic director at London's Hispania – heads the kitchen here at his home restaurant, sharing the cooking with his father Pedro. Casa Gerardo has a rustic look that belies the modernity of its food: the 25-dish *degustación* menu mixes such traditional favourites as *fabada* – a luscious stew of chorizo, pork, beans and black pudding – with inspiring takes on local ingredients, such as cod in a plankton sauce. Ctra AS-19, km 8,5, 33438 Asturias; restaurantecasagerardo.es

El Portal del Echaurren

This coaching inn has hosted a restaurant since Inquisition times. Today, it has two Michelin stars and Francis Paniego's modern Riojan cuisine shares a kitchen, and competes for customers, with his mother's traditional restaurant next door. Paniego features his mother's melt-in-the-mouth croquetas but after that the two part ways,

with Paniego offering dishes such as lamb's brain, and experiments with ingredients, such as red prawn carpaccio, the roasted pig C/Padre José García, 26280 Ezcaray, echaurren.com

Aponiente

Angel León, known as "sea chef", comes from a fishing background. He has built his family's love of the sea into the menu at Aponiente, which earned a Michelin star exclusively seafood, including *queso de cabrales* and *seafood cheese* credited with plankton as an ingredient, so place to try *chupón* plankton for dinner. Puerto Escondi, El Puerto de San Pedro, Cádiz; aponiente.com

Solana

Situated among the hills near Bilbao, Solana started as a typical tavern. It was later taken into a Michelin

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Vintage Ports
Domaine de la Romanee Conti
and other fine wines

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