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THE CHAMPAGNE GUIDE

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE
TO CHAMPAGNE

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GEOFFROY

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CHAMPAGNE GEOFFROY

PROPRIÉTAIRE - RÉCOLTANT - ÉLABORATEUR

'I am a winegrower,' says young, fifth-generation vigneron Jean-Baptiste Geoffroy. 'I need to be in the vineyard, this is my passion.' There is a well-considered sensibility about Geoffroy, and every detail of his work in the vineyard and winery follows a stringent regime, while maintaining practical common sense. With 11 glorious hectares in Cumières, and one in each of the nearby villages of Damery, Hautvillers and two in Fleury-la-Rivière, he is well placed to capture the fruit purity, poise and deep mineral fingerprint of some of the finer premier crus of the Vallée de la Marne. The sustaining presence of malic acidity makes his champagnes particularly long-lived.

The finest grower in Cumières is no longer in Cumières. With winemaking facilities and cellars shared between his grandmother's house, his father's house and a neighbour, when the opportunity came to consolidate in 2008, Jean-Baptiste Geoffroy moved the whole operation 20 minutes (by tractor) down the road to a proud and spacious facility in Aÿ.

'Nothing has changed in the vineyards,' asserts Jean-Baptiste. 'I want to create a champagne of terroir, to achieve the best expression of the soil in the grapes.' To this end, his highest goal in the winery is to maintain freshness in every cuvée. This proved to be a challenge, working from three sites in Cumières, necessitating regular pumping and moving of bottles.

Now he can guarantee that his grapes are on the press less than an hour after they are harvested, in a facility ingeniously designed to do away with pumping altogether. Taking advantage of the hill behind, the harvest is delivered to the press on the third level of the building, and the juice flows by gravity to settling

tanks immediately below the press on the second level, then to fermentation on the first level, and finally to two levels of deep maturation cellars below. In 2012 he purchased a further 500 square metres of storage space in the village, not to increase production, but to relocate bottles to provide space to move his barrels deeper into the cellar, where the temperature is more stable.

Every step of production is geared towards maintaining freshness and vineyard character, which Geoffroy achieves with admirable consistency, even with low use of sulphur dioxide as a preservative. A traditional press is employed, which he admits is difficult to operate by hand, but worth every effort for quality. Each of 45 different parcels is pressed and vinified separately, and the tailles of each pressing separated and vinified independently.

Fermentation is conducted variously in the best vessels to facilitate controlled oxidation, generally small tanks for non-vintage wines, and small barrels and large foudres for vintage wines and the best pinot noir

parcels, and Geoffroy has recently shown a preference for 350-litre barrels. Previously using only older barrels, he has recently introduced a turnover of younger barrels, purchased from Colin-Morey in Chassagne-Montrachet, though wild ferment and oak flavours and tannins can at times conflict with the elegance of his fruit.

Ferments rely on wild yeast, but are inoculated if they don't start naturally. To further preserve freshness, malolactic fermentation is avoided (but will occasionally start spontaneously). Only concentrated grape juice is used for dosage, because he says he couldn't find a good balance using sugar. 'This emphasises the taste of the grapes and the character of the soil,' he says.

Geoffroy generally uses extra brut dosages of less than 5g/L. As he puts it, 'A champagne must always be very fine, elegant and fresh. If you have good ripeness and good practice in the winery you don't need dosage.'

Ripeness is achieved through painstaking attention to every detail in the vineyard. Geoffroy's annual production of 130,000 bottles is sourced exclusively from his own vines, apart from 5% permitted under récoltant-manipulant registration. Pinot rules in this part of the world, and his holdings comprise 40% pinot noir, 40% meunier and 20% chardonnay.

EARTH-FRIENDLY APPROACH

His eco-friendly approach is close to organic, but falls purposely short of the constraints of certification. 'I like to say I am biological, without being biodynamic,' he says. To best express the soil in the grapes, vineyards are ploughed to discourage surface roots and drive the vines deeper into the subsoils. To the same end, several species of natural grasses are cultivated in the mid-rows to provide surface competition. He is currently introducing a horse to plough one vineyard in an attempt to reduce tractor compaction. Organic fertilisers encourage



Jean-Baptiste Geoffroy checks the fill on a barrel.

soil health, and herbicides are avoided. Sulphur and copper sulphate sprays are used where possible, but here he sometimes deviates from a strict organic regime, calling on other chemicals as required.

Geoffroy knows each of his 45 plots intimately, and treats each separately, regarding them variously as grand cru, premier cru or unclassified. The blanket classification of Cumières as premier cru makes no sense to him. 'On the poor soil and sand at the top of the hill near the forest, it is inferior to Damery, which is unclassified,' he clarifies. 'The early-ripening middle slope of the south-facing amphitheatre of Cumières north of the city is of grand cru quality, and to the west it is premier cru.' He points out each on a satellite photo, and his designations correspond precisely with green patches that betray the most vigorous vines. There is a natural regulation of vigour in Geoffroy's vines, with old vines and mid-row grasses limiting yields, ensuring earlier ripeness.

COTEAUX CHAMPENOIS RED WINES

This approach allows him to produce one of the most celebrated Coteaux Champenois still red wines, a passion he inherited from his father and grandfather. 'I make a red wine from the best grapes of my terroir, from the oldest vines and the lowest yields,' he says.

After experimenting extensively with red wine production in Beaujolais and Burgundy, Geoffroy produces red wine only in warmer vintages from Cumières pinot noir (meunier for the first time in 2008), releasing it as both a non-vintage and a vintage cuvée. The wines undergo malolactic fermentation and mature in 600-litre demi-muids for at least 12 months. These are long-ageing wines, with the potential to live for decades, and are only released when he deems them ready. Production is small and sporadic. 'It's good to make Coteaux Champenois when you don't need to!' he says. 'You can't make it to demand or in every vintage.'

In 2012, Geoffroy simplified the name of the estate from 'René Geoffroy' to 'Geoffroy' and introduced a new label, depicting the gate of the house in Aÿ to represent his new identity. 'It is not my philosophy to put my first name on the label, as I hope to one day pass the estate on to my children. There is no point changing the name with every generation,' he says.

Vintages, varieties, dosage and date of disgorgement are displayed on the back of every label, a laudable commitment for a small grower who disgorges every 2–3 months and tweaks the dosage for each disgorgement.

With undeviating attention to well-situated vineyards, an enviable production facility larger than his needs – and no intention to grow production – Cumières' finest grower is as fine as ever.



GEOFFROY EXPRESSION BRUT PREMIER CRU NV \$\$

92 points • 2011 BASE VINTAGE • DISGORGED DECEMBER 2015 • TASTED IN AUSTRALIA

50% meunier, 30% pinot noir, 10% chardonnay from Cumières and a little from Hautvillers; average vine age 20 years; tank fermented; 2010 reserves part aged in old casks; no malolactic fermentation; 8g/L dosage; 50% of production volume, ~65,000 bottles

Even in the difficult 2011 season, this cuvée rises to its brief of easy-drinking freshness. Meunier takes a confident lead in fragrant strawberry and red apple appeal, creating a compelling contrast with crisp malic acidity and tight grapefruit and lemon zest notes. It's fresher and more primary than ever, with more than three years on lees lending only subtle almond meal and spice notes. The dry grip of 2011 is refreshingly underplayed on a vibrant finish, thanks to the cut of malic acidity juxtaposed with well-rounded dosage.

GEOFFROY PURETÉ BRUT NATURE PREMIER CRU NV \$\$

92 points • 2010 BASE VINTAGE • DISGORGED MARCH 2016 • TASTED IN AUSTRALIA

50% meunier, 40% pinot noir, 10% chardonnay from Cumières, Damery and Fleury-la-Rivière; average vine age 25 years; 2009 reserves part aged in oak casks; no malolactic fermentation; no dosage

Pureté is Expression with another year on lees and no dosage. Full malic acidity and no added sugar makes for a tense and steely champagne with accentuated salt minerality. Yet the accord of 2010 and 2009 brings generosity of white peach and red apple to its crunchy lemon zest profile, bolstered by the biscuit and spice of five years lees age. It's clean, precise, taut and high-strung; an oyster-ready style driven by tense malic acidity. Perfect ripeness and great persistence make it alluringly enticing this year. Champagne die-hards, this one's for you.



GEOFFROY EMPREINTE BRUT PREMIER CRU 2009 \$\$

91 points • DISGORGED OCTOBER 2015 • TASTED IN AUSTRALIA

75% pinot noir, 20% chardonnay, 5% meunier from a selection of very early-ripening plots above Cumières on clay and chalk soils with fragments of flint; average vine age 30 years; 80% fermented in tuns, demi-muid casks and barrels; 6g/L dosage

Geoffroy is refining his style with each vintage, and upheld the lower dosage he introduced in the elegant 2008 season again in the richer 2009, though rose to the magnitude of this ripe vintage with a considerable 80% vinification in wood (it was just 24% in 2008). His aspiration is to portray the best expression of Cumières pinot noir, and in the bold 2009 season, these early-ripening plots above Cumières certainly deliver their distinctive personality. The result is as powerful as any Cumières I've tasted, a complex and secondary style brimming with baked apple, fig, even rockmelon, with barrel work contributing charcuterie and game (a little more funky than I'd like it to be) and bottle age layering butterscotch, gingernut biscuits and spice. The fine, salty minerality of Cumières defines a long finish, enlivened by a crunchy, focused drive that celebrates the vivacity and tension of malic acidity.





GEOFFROY VOLUPTÉ BRUT PREMIER CRU 2007 \$\$\$

93 points • DISGORGED DECEMBER 2015 • TASTED IN AUSTRALIA

58% chardonnay from Geoffroy's most beautiful Cumières plots of very chalky soil with shallow topsoil; 42% pinot noir; average vine age 35 years; 45% vinified in barrels and vats; no malolactic fermentation; 4g/L dosage

Two years ago I wrote that this beautifully focused style just needs time to soften and calm down. Another two years on lees has fulfilled its promise. Low dosage and a full serve of malic acidity in a chardonnay-focused style make for a tense and steely champagne of impressive stature. A high-strung lemon zest core is filled out with impressive complexity of fig, mixed spice and ginger cake, finishing long and dry, with firm minerality and prominent acidity. Time has made for a creamy mouthfeel and heightened vanilla nougat character, underlined with the fine chalk minerality of Cumières, drawing out a long and enticing finish. It's wonderful now and will only get better over the next decade.

GEOFFROY ROSÉ DE SAIGNÉE BRUT PREMIER CRU NV \$\$

94 points • 100% 2012 VINTAGE • DISGORGED OCTOBER 2015 • TASTED IN AUSTRALIA

Saignée of 100% skin-contact pinot noir, sourced from clay and silt soils with some marl; average vine age 25 years; no malolactic fermentation; 10g/L dosage

Renowned for his long-lived Cumières rouge Coteaux Champenois, it's no surprise that Geoffroy's Rosé de Saignée also improves with time. Now released with sufficient age for the vintage to be declared (on the back label) post-disgorgement, this is a style of medium, vibrant crimson salmon-hue and exuberant primary freshness of pink pepper, pomegranate, red cherry and tangy raspberry fruits. Beautifully ripe fruit expression is intricately supported and freshened by ripe, brightly poised malic acidity, fine, skilfully handled tannins, exactingly balanced dosage, and the salty chalk mineral expression of Cumières. The great 2012 season has given birth to one of Geoffroy's most enthralling Rosé de Saignées.



GEOFFROY ÉLIXIR DEMI-SEC NV \$\$

91 points • 2011 BASE VINTAGE • DISGORGED NOVEMBER 2014 • TASTED IN AUSTRALIA

2010 reserves; 35g/L dosage

Geoffroy's demi-sec is a refreshingly clean and well-balanced style, thanks to the energy and cut of malic acidity delivering balance rarely encountered with this level of dosage in Champagne. Baked apple and preserved lemon unite with the honey, gingernut biscuits and spice of three and a half years bottle age and more than two years cork age, drawing out a finish at once long, rich, sweet and lively. If you're chasing a sweeter style, this is a good bet.

