

WINE News

*The best time of the year to enjoy
Champagne is from January
through December.*



JANUARY 30, 2017 FEATURES

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The Region for All Seasons

By Gary Westby

Champagne is a wine that I think should be enjoyed all year long. True, it will never be cheap, because it is the wine with the highest minimum standards of any appellation in the world. That being said, the incredible strength of the dollar combined with the weakness of the wine market in Europe has made our Direct Import Champagnes some of the best values in the store. In order for their wine to be called Champagne, the growers can only plant on high-quality sites, and all the sites that qualify have been planted—there is no more land to plant, and plans to expand have been put on the back burner. Yield limits, long aging (at least 15 months on lees) and restrictions on how

much one can press out of a kilo of grapes all ensure that Champagne is consistently good. We go beyond that with our Direct Imports—our most inexpensive bottling is aged for 36 months. As I write, we have ten selections under \$30, the most we have had in a decade! Most of these are all-estate grown, long aged, serious wines that compete with our very best wines of any type at their price points. They also go perfectly with the lighter food that most of us are trying to eat in January. Sushi and Champagne has long been a favorite pairing for me, and a huge treat that doesn't seem like dieting. Why not enjoy a little bit of the good stuff more often?

Baron-Fuente “Grande Reserve” Brut Champagne (\$23.99) The Grande Reserve from Baron-Fuente isn't just our best-priced Champagne—it is the most accessible of all of our Direct Imports. It is made mostly from estate fruit from the Aisne department in the west of Champagne, an area that supplies Paris more than the export market because of its proximity to the capital. This toasty Champagne gets its leesy quality from three years of aging and never disappoints!



Jean-Jacques Lamoureux “Réserve” Brut Champagne (\$29.99) Vivien Lamoureux makes this all-estate grown gem exclusively from Pinot Noir grown in Les Riceys. This village is only three miles from the border with Burgundy, and in years past flipped back and forth between the Dukes of Burgundy and the Comtes de Champagne every time war broke out. This has a depth of savory Pinot fruit that one would expect from 50% reserve wines and such great terroir.



2009 Louise Brison Vintage Brut Champagne (\$29.99) This all-organic, estate-grown gem is three-quarters barrel fermented and composed of half-and-half Chardonnay and Pinot Noir by Delphine Brulez, one of the few growers with a masters degree in enology. This elegant, super dry (only two grams dosage per liter) Champagne is perfect for the jaded palate, and reminds me very much of the Veuve Clicquot La Grande Dame. A must-try at the price!



Billecart-Salmon: Reason to Celebrate with Rosé and (RED)

By Diana Turk

It's not often that one can find Champagne with the clout and name recognition of a bigger house and the stellar quality of a smaller grower, all at reasonable prices. But Billecart-Salmon, founded in 1818 by a husband-and-wife team and still family-owned and operated, manages to combine those elements with a deftness and dedication not always seen in the glamorous Champagne world.

Perhaps the most famous in their lineup is the benchmark, non-vintage **Billecart-Salmon Brut Rosé Champagne (\$74.99)**. It's hard to gush without feeling like you're piggybacking on critical accolades and popular opinion, but this best-seller is worth the hype. With gorgeous rose petal and delicate white peach on the nose, followed by pure strawberry fruit gleaming on the palate, this showcases Billecart-Salmon's bright style while adding the sophistication of mousse texture and a mineral finish. There's freshness throughout, plus substance—this would be a great wine to pair with heartier meals like fried chicken, although its elegance makes a glass equally at home with caviar. Tiny, creamy bubbles only enhance the drinking experience, and cooler, longer primary fermentation in stainless steel (3-5 weeks!) keeps everything crisp. Billecart-Salmon uses all three



big Champagne grapes: Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and curiously, more Pinot Meunier than most houses. They have traditionally championed Meunier and the result is a nuanced wine with depth. Billecart-Salmon's Brut Rosé is reliably special for any occasion. **94 JS, 93 WS.**

But Billecart-Salmon doesn't stop at high-end offerings. They also have heart, recently collaborating with the charity (RED) on a limited edition of their focused, crowd-friendly Brut Reserve: **Billecart-Salmon "(RED) Cuvée Brut Reserve" Champagne (\$49.99)**.

This bottling confused customers and staff alike all holiday season, but while the label reads "red," inside, the wine is the same brut cuvée we know and love! Aged 36 months on the lees, this is clean and vivacious, rich with stone fruit and honey, plus that classic chalky finish. The only difference is that \$5 from each bottle purchased goes to the Global Fund to fight AIDS, which provides 16 days of HIV medication, according to (RED). You may remember (RED)'s earliest incarnation in 2006, with Bono and his specialty iPod. Today they've raised \$365 million, and Billecart-Salmon is their only Champagne partner. The goal is to hit \$100,000, and with bubbly this good, it's easy to be charitable and celebratory.



Krug Grande Cuvée: Consistently Superb

By Alex Schroeder

Champagne as a grape-growing region can be rather vexing. In a bad year some or most of the crop can be severely damaged by a late frost, fungus, excessive heat or any other number of possible problems. How is it then, that the Krug Champagne house can offer exceptional-quality Champagne year after year, uninterrupted?

When Joseph Krug founded the Krug Champagne house in 1843, his aim was to be able to do just that, and the system he and his descendants created is one of the most time-consuming, complex and impressive processes in the industry. It takes over twenty years to complete, but it's well worth it, because it gives us the flagship Grande Cuvée—the gold standard for luxury, non-vintage Champagne, and the poster child for consistency.

To prepare for these "off-vintages" Krug has amassed a library of over 150 different wines, made from Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay, from exceptional vintages currently dating back to 1990. Each year, a panel of five tasters—including house head Olivier Krug—convenes to taste each and decide which 120 will be used to achieve the most generous expression of Champagne each year. You can look up exactly what the blend of your bottle is, online, by typing in the code on the back at krug.com.

This means that **Krug "Grande Cuvée" Brut Champagne (\$149.99)** can feature beautifully aged, barrel-fermented wines alongside fresher vintages, or the full, rich flavors of ripe vintages with the freshness and acidity of cooler ones. It creates a unique flavor profile deserving of deep contemplation, and unlike anything you could ever get from a single vintage.

The Grande Cuvée has a core of dark fruit that is full and powerful, but still allows for the presence of delicate, aged Burgundy notes and the mellow flavors of ripe stone fruit and honeysuckle with subtle, toasty brioche. There is wonderful chalky minerality, and a vibrant mousse made full and creamy by the minimum six years aging on the lees. The flavors are seamless and expressive at once, and the balance ensures that it would age gracefully for decades to come.

The Grande Cuvée certainly isn't the least expensive Champagne K&L offers, but it may very well be the best value you'll find on the shelf. **95 WS.**



A Small-Estate Gem That Should Not Be Missed!

By Scott Beckerley

I have always been a huge fan of the wines of A.D. Coutelas (formerly Amaury Coutelas), a small estate gem that is located in the village of Villers-sous-Châtillon. Currently run by Damien and Angélique Coutelas, the estate has always produced high-quality, complex and clean Champagnes. These wines are also some of the best bargains that I have ever come across in all Champagne—I have tasted Champagnes that cost nearly double that do not hold up to their quality. We were very fortunate to have both Angélique and Damien come to our October, 2016 Champagne Tent Events, so many of you have probably already met them. They are as charming as their wines are! We are very lucky to have more of their wines in stock and supplies are limited, so don't wait.

The “entry level” selection is the non-vintage **A.D. Coutelas “Cuvée Louis Victor” Brut Champagne (\$34.99)**, a blend of one-third each Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier. It has a gracious nose of white flowers, citrus and nectarine. It is delicate, yet nuanced, with elements of cream and butter and oak, at once mellow and racy—pretty much the best of both worlds! Simply fantastic for the price.

A brilliant follow-up is the **2008 A.D. Coutelas Vintage Brut Champagne (\$34.99)**, which is richer in style, with lots of fleshy, yellow fruits, toast and nuts and brioche, and is a blend of 50% each of Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier. The dosage is a low six grams per liter and this results in the telltale Coutelas, long, clean finish. Simply superb! A wine this brilliant, at this price point, from the great 2008 vintage is quite mind-blowing! In addition to Villers-sous-Châtillon the Coutelas estate also has vineyards in Ambonnay, Bouzy, Vitry-le-François, Troissy and Chardonnay from Avize. As many of you know, Ambonnay and Bouzy, in particular, are known for their premium quality Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier, while Avize is renowned for its magnificent Chardonnay. Many of the vines from the vineyards used in the vintage release are over 80 years old!

The non-vintage **A.D. Coutelas “Elixir” Brut Rosé Champagne (\$34.99)** is a wine that will fool you. Once you see the deep, dark color, you will be fooled into thinking this Pinot Noir-based (67%) brut rosé is lush and dense and super rich. The color comes from the 50% that is *rosé de saignée*, but the remaining blend of 33% Chardonnay results in the lingering, citrus finish.



Angélique and Damien Coutelas, the A&D of A.D. Coutelas.

Dark strawberry and quince fruit with tart lingonberry and nectarine come out to play at the finish. Simply great. Screams out to be matched with a pork roast.

Although difficult to choose, my personal favorite has always been the non-vintage **A.D. Coutelas “Cuvée 1809” Brut Champagne (\$59.99)**. This wine hits another gear completely. A Chardonnay-based blend (80%) with Pinot Meunier (20%), the nose has clean clay, truffle, sea salt, toast and smoke. A *lot* going on here! Vinified in oak and aged on cork, not crown cap. Fruit comes from vines that are over 40 years old. The low dosage (six grams) reins in the oak and adds to the complexity. Damien has done a spectacular job with this one! Fine mousse, with flavors of green apple, fresh honey and minerals. The “1809” label indicates when the vineyard was founded (they started producing their own wines in the 1920s) and the “A.D. Coutelas” on the label indicates “Angélique and Damien Coutelas.” I would put Angélique’s name first, as well. She ties *all* of the corks down with twine herself in the traditional manner, as the “1809” is not sealed with the typically found Champagne cage. Everything at A.D. Coutelas is done by hand, so this is no surprise. Angélique and Damien are two of the hardest-working winemakers in all of Champagne and it shows in their wines!





Paul-Vincent Ariston in front of his riddling racks at Ariston Aspasia.

The Distinctive Wines of Champagne Aspasia

By Gary Westby

If I could name one producer that pops to mind when I think of Champagne all year round, it would unquestionably be Champagne Aspasia. I can't think of anyone in the wine world with the positive smile and passion for life that Paul-Vincent Ariston, the owner and boss of this great estate, has. The estate is in the far northwest corner of Champagne in the utterly charming village of Brouillet. Two cars on the road at the same time is a traffic jam here, and agriculture is mixed between vines for Champagne: corn and seeds for oil. The lack of industrial activity and the diversity of crops help make Paul-Vincent's vineyards some of the healthiest I have seen in the region. A couple of the single vineyard offerings from Aspasia are consistently among my favorite Champagnes, period. The **Ariston Aspasia Blanc de Blancs Brut Champagne (\$34.99)** comes from the steepest vineyard in Champagne that I have walked up without stairs: the Gouttes d'Or.



This east-facing site yields a creamy, yet bone-dry Champagne with both the white flower aroma of Chardonnay and the great minerality that one expects in blanc de blancs. In 750-milliliter bottle it is aged for three years, but in **magnum (1.5L \$74.99)** it is aged for five. The perfect size for more than two people! It is also available as one of our best **half bottles (375ml \$18.99)** at any price.

Only one press load of the exotic **Ariston Aspasia "Cepages d'Antan" Brut Champagne (\$99.00)** comes from the less than one-acre Le Walin vineyard in Brouillet, and only in good vintages. It is co-pressed and fermented, and composed of grape varieties that almost went extinct in Champagne: 40% Petit Meslier, 40% Arbanne and 20% Pinot Blanc. These varieties nearly died out—after phylloxera struck, they were not replanted due to the fact that they take longer to ripen than Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Meunier. With a warmer climate in Champagne now, several of the best growers in Champagne are growing them again. This wine manages extraordinary, laser-like focus and mineral-driven length while also showcasing exotic aromas. This bottling is far more than a curiosity—it is one of the best bottles of Champagne we carry at any price.



Ariston Aspasia "Carte Blanche" Brut Champagne (\$27.99)

How does Paul-Vincent make an all-estate Champagne, age it for five years on the lees and still have us retail it for so little? The record-setting strength of the dollar helps! This is composed of 40% Chardonnay, 30% Pinot Noir and 30% Meunier and has a great natural toasty quality from long aging.

Ariston Aspasia Brut Rosé Champagne (750ml \$34.99; 375ml \$18.99) This is one of our least expensive rosé Champagnes, but also one of our very best. It is composed of half-and-half Meunier and Pinot Noir, and made using both the maceration technique and the addition of old vine red wine to give it the rosé color, aroma and flavor. If you like good body, tiny bubbles, plenty of red fruit flavor and a crisp, dry finish, you should not miss this!



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