

# Champagne

From small producers



## *An introduction to some of the world's most exciting wines.*

*By Gary Westby, K&L champagne buyer*



Small producer champagne, one of the world's most exciting wines, is now available to American wine enthusiasts, and we here at K&L spend a lot of time finding some of the best to offer our customers. In this brochure I'll tell you what makes wines from these producers different from mass market brands, and I'll

describe how differences between producers contribute to making the wines so individual. Don't forget, I am always available at K&L to answer any of your questions!

Although Moët & Chandon, Clicquot, Pommery, Piper Heidsieck, Charles Heidsieck, and Laurent-Perrier control nearly all of the US champagne market, they are only six of the over 5000 houses selling champagne. Included in that staggering number are three main types of producers. The big six above are all "grand marques" (translated "big brands" or "big names"), négociants that buy still wine, juice, grapes and even bottles of champagne in bulk from cooperatives and growers to make their wines. A second type, the cooperative, is a group of grape growers who pool their funds to buy equipment, and hire winemakers and salespeople to make and sell their products. Feuillette is a high-profile example. A third type, by far the most numerous and also the most interesting, is the small producer. These are usually families that make wine from their own estate vineyards but they can also be small négociants who purchase grapes to make champagne on their own.

Since these small producers do the vineyard work as well as the wine making, they can control the entire process of making their champagnes. Most own or contract small plots in just one or two villages, giving their wines terroir (a strong flavor of the place where the grapes grew) just as in Burgundy or Bordeaux. Often small producers sell some of their grapes, juice, or wine to the grand marques where it may end up in the tête de cuvées of these houses, even when it was material the small producer found substandard and did not want to use in their own champagne!



*Small producer champagnes are individual as their producers. Benoit Tarlant (left) tasting with René Collard in Mr. Collard's cellar in Reuil.*

Champagne is the most heavily regulated wine region in the world, and it serves the drinker well to know a little bit about its legal categories. Each producer must print their registration number on every champagne label. It starts with two letters denoting their category, and ends with a number for the individual company. The most common category available in the US is the NM, or négociant. These companies are allowed to make champagne from their own land, from purchased grapes, from purchased juice, from purchased still wine, and even by disgorging, dosing and labeling finished bottles of champagne. The RM category that includes producers who make champagne exclusively from estate fruit is rarest in the US but the most numerous in Champagne. The less common MA classification includes buyer's own brands (imagine "Safeway Select champagne") purchased from a grower, négociant or co-op. An obscure category, the RC, is for a member of a co-op who buys back production from the co-op to sell under his own label. A little more common in the USA is the CM, or cooperative, Feuillel, as I mentioned before, being the biggest.



*Unique terroirs produce distinctive wines. These fossils came from the soil of the Ariston vineyard.*

We direct import all the champagne presented in this brochure to get the best quality and the best price. Most champagne that comes into the US market is marked up far too many times. A shipment commonly goes from the producer, to an export broker, to an import company, to a distributor, to a retailer or restaurant, before finally ending up in your glass. Our direct import champagnes are not only less expensive, they are also more interesting than the big brands. Many of Champagne's high quality small firms (often family) believe they don't have time to export. They may feel that they already sell their wine fast enough, or just assume that the label-conscious US market would not be interested in their wine. We have focused on finding and offering to our customers growers (RM) and small, quality-conscious négociant (NM) producers that we feel have the very highest standards. All of the following champagnes are only marked up once. I hope that you enjoy drinking them as much as I have!



**Ariston** was K&L's first direct import champagne producer, and they are still one of the very best we carry. All of the fruit for their wine comes from their estate vineyard in Brouillet, a tiny village in the far northwest corner of Champagne. The only commerce in town is sales from the four producers who make wine there. Although small, Brouillet has a long history. It is on the pilgrimage route that honors Saint Jean Baptiste de la Salle who baptized Clovis. The saint is said to have spent his happiest days here and in the neighboring village of Crugny. The Ariston's house is also quite historic. It once belonged to the Moët family who were awarded it after campaigning with Joan of Arc. The Aristons run a bed and breakfast out of it, the most relaxing, quiet place I've stayed during a buying trip. Please let me know if you plan a trip to Champagne. I would love to give you their information.

Far more historic, however, are Brouillet's vineyards. Sixty million years ago this was the ocean bed, and the vineyard is littered with shellfish fossils. The large proportion of fossils shows through in the virile minerality of Brouillet champagnes. Other factors contribute to making the terroir in Brouillet special. The slopes are steeper than the rolling country in the Cotes de Blancs, Valley of the Marne, and even most sites on the Mountain of Reims. These slopes give the vines more sunlight and a better chance to ripen in this most northern part of Champagne. The Aristons start their harvest much later than others in Champagne, and often they don't finish until late October. The long growing season gives their wines some of the most expressive and pure fruit in Champagne.



*Paul-Vincent Ariston (left) tasting newly-fermented wines with his father, Remi Ariston.*

The Aristons' 30 acres of vineyard, all in the village of Brouillet, have a quite high proportion of old vines. They also experiment with the aim of improving quality. In 2000 they planted a small plot of fromenteau (pinot gris), petit meslier, and arbanne to see how these almost extinct native grapes would do on their terroir. Paul-Vincent Ariston is part of a small group of very serious young wine growers that meet regularly to taste each other's wines. They also visit other producers. When I arrived this year, Paul-Vincent had just returned from Salon, Selosse, and Launois and had lots to say about what he had seen. In a part of France that is inward to the extreme, this willingness to learn is a huge asset. He is a wine guy! Here are some of the wines we have from Ariston.

No bottle in our inventory transports me to Champagne like the Ariston **Carte Blanche Brut**. It is as true to its terroir and as pure as anything I could wish for! A balanced cuvée in every way, made of 40% chardonnay, 30% pinot noir and 30% meunier, this champagne is clean and powerful at once.

The Aristons vineyards are vastly different from those of other blanc de blancs producers that we carry. The steeper slopes, less chalk and more fossils in the soil of Brouillet make for a rich, creamy style chardonnay champagne that will appeal to just about anyone. The Ariston **Aspasie Blanc de Blancs** is one of my favorite toasting champagnes. The flavors are up front, and it is open-knit and fun. It is a perfect way to start a party.

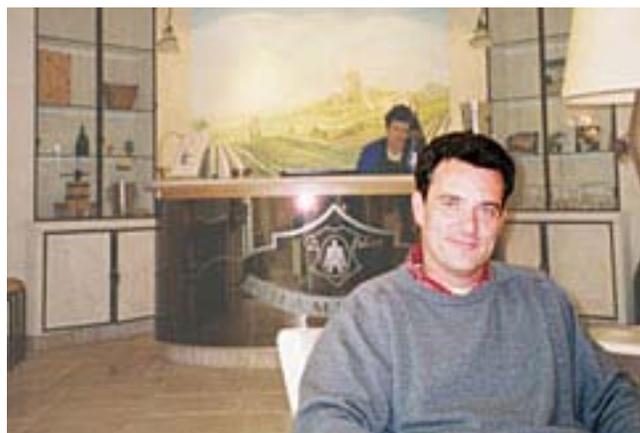
The Ariston **1996 Vintage Brut** is one of the best '96 vintage champagnes I have tasted yet—from anyone. Paul-Vincent Ariston decided to hold this wine and leave it on the yeast even longer than Roederer aged their Cristal. It has a purity of pinot noir fruit and a rare focus that on the nose reminds me of Volnay. In the mouth it is bright and light without lacking concentration. It's just plain complete. I think that this wine has more than a decade of great drinking ahead of it.



**Arnould.** I have been trying to find a top quality producer from the village of Verzenay for several years, and now I've succeeded. Verzenay, on the Mountain of Reims, is the farthest north of all of the grand crus. It is unique because it faces north, away from the sun, and still manages to produce some of the most powerful pinot noir in Champagne. Some of the locals say that a mysterious warm air current is the explanation for this ripening anomaly. What ever the cause, it stamps

a distinctive hazelnut quality on the wines. If you have enjoyed the wines of Bollinger and Krug in the past, I think you will very much enjoy Michel Arnould's bold, masculine champagnes that have plenty of toasty flavor.

Patrick is the fifth generation at Champagne Michel Arnould. They own 27 acres in the village of Verzenay, a quite sizable holding in this high rent area. It is planted to 80% pinot noir and 20% chardonnay, average for the village. Quite a few plots of very old vines are positioned in the golden band of the mid-slope, where the sun exposure is best. They have 40- and 45-year-old vines in the lieux-dits of Corret, Perthos and Coutures and 50+ year vines in the red wine vineyard Carreaux. All Arnould wines undergo complete malolactic fermentation in stainless steel and enamel vats.



*Patrick Arnould in the tasting room at Champagne Michel Arnould.*

Michel Arnould's **Brut Reserve** is composed of two-thirds pinot noir and one-third chardonnay from the 1999 and 1998 harvests. This champagne is a pleasure just to look at with its pretty, light-golden color and the precise bead that comes from time in the bottle. The wine has an explosive hazelnut and bright pinot fruit aroma and a flavor that manages to be both rich and clean. It is dry at only 10 g per liter dosage and it has a long, refreshing finish.

The **Grand Cuvée Brut** comes exclusively from the 1997 harvest although not labeled as such. Made of two-thirds pinot noir and one-third chardonnay, it has a gorgeous gold color studded with tiny bubbles. The aroma is amazing. It has the signature hazelnut pinot core and a graceful, delicate balance that Verzenay wines sometimes lack. On the palate creaminess complements its racy, cherry fruit, and an extraordinarily long, dry finish follows. It is dosed at 9 g per liter—very dry! It will age well.



**Bonnerave.** The Marguet-Bonnerave family have 20 acres in the grand cru of Ambonnay, 10 acres in the grand cru of Bouzy, and 2.5 acres in the grand cru of Mailly, all prime growing areas in the pinot noir stronghold of Champagne, the Mountain of Reims.

Mr. Benoit Marguet-Bonnerave, who is also the vineyard manager for Launois (he is married to the lovely Severine Launois), runs this property with his father. The family first started growing grapes in 1870, and they made their first estate grown champagne in 1905. Now almost all their grapes go into estate wines. Benoit is one of the most interesting and ambitious young Champenois that I have met. Besides his fantastic estate wines, he has a project in the works to create a true négociant prestige cuvée, blended from the best old vine plots in the mid-slope of all the grand crus—a very ambitious project! Even after the grapes have been secured, it will take years of ageing before we will taste it, but I've already let him know that my customers will be interested!



The Marguet-Bonnerave **Cuvée Reserve Brut** is made entirely out of grand cru, estate grown fruit, 60% pinot noir and 40% chardonnay. It is very rich and powerful champagne with tons of pinot noir muscle and plenty of yeasty, toasty flavor. This is a gutsy, masculine wine that shows off the strength that the south-facing slopes Ambonnay and Bouzy provide.

It took three years of hard searching, but we knew we could find great rosé champagne for under \$30. The Marguet-Bonnerave **Brut Rosé** is composed of 70% chardonnay and 30% pinot noir (15% red wine from Bouzy) from the family's estate vineyards. It spent three years ageing on the lees and combines a wonderful, subtle, strawberry-like nose with a fresh, delicate flavor. This is an elegant style, and most of the chardonnay the family grows goes into preserving its delicacy and fineness. The finish is long and dry. If you enjoy Billecart-Salmon rosé, this is definitely one to try.



**Bonville.** The Bonville family owns 50 acres of vineyards in Avize, Cramant and Oger, all grand cru villages in the Cotes de Blancs area of Champagne. This is the best area in Champagne for chardonnay grapes, and all of the wines that we have from Bonville are

blanc de blancs.

Like all top quality growers, the Bonville families are using more and more organic techniques in the vineyard. They do not spray by helicopter or out of habit. They prefer to intervene only when they feel forced to. They have been in the business of growing grapes since 1726, and making their own wine for sale since the 1920's. Like most of the producers I have met in Champagne, they have a wonderful tension in their family between the experience of the older generations and the pioneering spirit of the young generation. Olivier Bonville, who was born in 1970, has fresh ideas for the family estate. His pet project, the Cuvée Les Belles Voyes, is a single vineyard champagne that is one of the best wines I have tasted.

The non-vintage **Brut Selection Blanc de Blancs** is blended from three very good years: '97, '98 and '99. This champagne has exotic, ripe-fruit aromatics and, as the glass warms up, there are also traces of clean clay and earth, just as in great Chablis! On the palate the wine has great fruit and a wonderful, full texture.

In the 1998 vintage the best area was the Cotes de Blanc and the **1998 Brut Millésime Blanc de Blancs** is a wonderful bottle. It is racier and cleaner than the 1996 vintage, but still has great richness. Although it should keep for a very, very long time, it is a wonderful drink right now.

*Gregory Condes, sommelier at Gary Danko Restaurant, pouring Bonville from double magnum.*



The **1996 Brut Millésime Blanc de Blancs** is one of the greats from the best vintage of the decade and perhaps one of the vintages of the century. It is nervy, complex and has a clean, elusive toastiness that is hard to put a finger on, but extremely easy to drink! This wine just has it all: concentration, length, and brilliant, well delineated flavors. It is drinking well now, but will cellar for more than ten years if you choose to lay it down.

The **Cuvée Les Belles Voyes** is one of the best champagnes we carry regardless of price. Only three thousand bottles were made from the one and three-quarters acre Belles Voyes vineyard in Oger. The vines were planted in 1938, and the vineyard is ideally located in the midslope of this grand cru village. I can only compare it to the Clos de Mesnil from Krug. Please treat it like a \$300 bottle. It would be that expensive if it went through champagne's traditional layers of mark up.



**Collard.** In Champagne Mr. René Collard is respected like no other grower, but his wines had never been exported until 2003. They probably never would have been had I not received a fortuitous introduction to him and his wines from Dan Ginsburg of De Meric

Champagne. I tasted Mr. Collard's wines with Dan and started to dream of being able to import them to the US. In 2003 I finally got a few cases. The wines sold out almost instantly, but in 2004 I got a little more. I hope I will continue to get small allocations, but I get the feeling that Mr. Collard does not like to sell his wine!

Mr. Collard's estate is 7 hectares (17.5 acres), about 90% meunier and 10% chardonnay. He has an amazing cellar, 25 feet deep at its shallowest and 75 feet deep at the far end. Here the wines he ships us have rested at a perfect 8.5 degrees Celsius since the day they were made. All of the wines were fermented in two-thirds old, large foudres and one-third enamel vats with no malolactic. They all spent a very, very long time on the lees and were only disgorged to fill my orders.

I agree with the growers of Champagne that Mr. Collard's wines are as good as they get, but they do have a very big personality, so please be warned that some palates will find them too much. They have twice the concentration of any other champagne. The following tasting notes are abbreviated because of space constraints. For complete notes visit [www.klwines.com](http://www.klwines.com).

The **Brut Carte d'Or** is based on the 1992 harvest and is almost exclusively meunier. I had a bottle at Boyer, the (then) Michelin three star in Reims, with Benoit Marguet-Bonnerave and Severine Launois, and it floored the three of us! The

looks on the faces of two of the best young vigneron in the region were something I will not soon forget! It is a rich, toasty mouthful with more wine in it than ought to fit in a 750 mL bottle.



*Since 1943 René Collard has been producing some of the best and most individualistic wines in Champagne.*

The **1990 Cuvée Réserve Millésime** has flavors of peach and a firm minerality to balance out the fruit. White truffle, brioche and pine nut flavors dominate the **1985 Cuvée Réserve Millésime**. The **1985 Cuvée Speciale Rosé Brut** is composed entirely of meunier. I have never experienced a wine like it. The only wine I can compare it to is Chambertin.

The **1976 Cuvée Réserve Millésime** is an excellent example of this hot vintage and is still completely fresh. Bold, creamy and full of white truffle savor, this wine is a giant. The **1976 Cuvée Prestige Roi Rene** has all the richness of the regular '76, but with more lift and elegance. The **1975 Cuvée Réserve Millésime** is one of the five best champagnes I have ever tasted. It has the freshness of a 1996 blanc de blancs and a level of complexity that few wines ever achieve.



**Launois.** Bernard Launois owns the most land of any grower producer in Champagne with 90 acres of vineyards, all of which are Veritas certified organic. The Launois wines we sell come from some of the most perfect sites in the Cotes de Blancs, gorgeous old vineyards located in the midslope of the grand cru villages of Mesnil, Oger, and Cramant.

The Launois family has tremendous ambition for perfecting their vineyards. Most producers in Champagne purchase vines from the local nurseries when they need to replant. At Launois the vineyard manager, Benoit Marguet-Bonnerave, has his own nursery project. Benoit takes the best plant material from the finest old plots and propagates them with help from a very passionate and dedicated nurseryman. After years of selecting and testing for viruses he will begin planting these selections next year.



*Benoit Marguet-Bonnerave and his nurseryman propagating cuttings from Launois' best plots.*

It is rare to find this kind of ambition in Champagne, France's most successful wine region. Since very few producers have trouble selling their champagne, it takes an individual of vision and pride to want to improve. Launois has also made a big investment in a new winery, purchasing a large facility with three new Coquard diagonal presses. Although he makes some of the best Champagne has to offer, he still seeks to improve. Bravo!

The **Cuvée Reserve Brut Blanc de Blancs** has the polished aromatics of chardonnay with a touch of pine nut and minerals. The flavors are broad and rich.

The **1998 Brut Blanc de Blancs** has extraordinary concentration and a wonderful tension between ripe chardonnay fruit minerality.

The **Sable Brut Blanc de Blancs** is a cremant style, not as heavily carbonated as regular champagne. Made of 100% chardonnay it has flavors of apple and brioche.

The Launois **Special Club** is made from two plots of 65-year-old vines. This wine is big, exotic, powerful, and looking for a good cellar for a long, long rest.



## **Leclerc Briant.** Mr.

Pascal Leclerc Briant is the fifth generation wine grower in his family. He has a huge amount of land for Champagne, 75 acres, with vineyards in Haut-villers, Damery, and Verneuil, but all of the champagne we buy comes from his best

sites in the village of Cumières. Located at the beginning of the Valley of the Marne, immediately west of Epernay, Cumières is almost always the first village in Champagne to harvest. It has the warmest microclimate. Leclerc Briant is a believer in Biodynamics and his vineyards are all cultivated by this, the strictest of all organic methods.

Three of the four champagnes we buy from Leclerc-Briant come from single vineyards. I don't know of any other producer who offers individual sites from the same village. Unlike almost all other quality producers in the Valley of the Marne, Pascal chooses to put the wines through full malolactic. He feels that it takes too much sulfur to stop the malo, and prefers to let it happen.

The three single vineyard wines include **Les Crayères** from a chalk-soil, south-facing vineyard. It has a fresh, clean vanilla bean and subtle raspberry fruit nose.

**Les Chèvres Pierreuses** comes from a steep seven-acre vineyard. Plain delicious with great fresh apple fruit. It amazes me that a wine can be so distinctive and complex while still maintaining such easygoing charm. A fantastic aperitif! The **Clos des Champions** is grown in a tiny 1.25 acre walled vineyard that faces south towards the Marne. The wall acts as an insulator, and the extra ripeness comes through in the body of the wine. This is big impressive stuff!



The **1999 Cuvée Rubis Brut Rosé** pushes the definition of rosé to the limit. Regulations prohibit red champagne, and Pascal Leclerc Briant gets into trouble nearly every year he makes this wine. Leclerc Briant does 100% skin contact maceration before fermentation and makes the reddest rosé in Champagne. It has a huge strawberry nose and lots of red pinot noir flavor.



**De Meric** is located in Ay, one of the most famous and historic grand cru villages in Champagne. De Meric's neighbors include, Bollinger, Gosset and Deutz. This is pinot noir country. The vineyards face south towards the Marne off the slope of the Mountain of

Reims. The wine from here used to be red for the courts of the kings of France. It was regarded as the equal of Burgundy in the 17th century.

De Meric is run by a small group of American, German and French champagne fans. Dan Ginsburg, an American, and Kirsten Neubarth, a German, moved away from their native countries to pursue their passion for champagne at De Meric. Production is very small, only 4200 cases a year. They use only traditional vertical Coquard presses and ferment mostly in older wood, including two 4000-liter oval wood foudres. Most often seen in Germany, a handful of high quality producers in Champagne use foudres. They give the wine enough air to add richness, texture, and another layer of complexity, while the wood contact area is small and does not add any vanilla flavor.

De Meric is a négociant, and they buy almost all of the grapes for their production; but unlike the big négociant brands sold in the USA, they do not buy pressed juice, vin clair (young still wines) or champagne sur latte (champagne bottled and matured by another négociant). They have long-term contracts with their growers, and have a bonus program to give them sizeable rewards for high quality grapes.

The **Grande Reserve Sous Bois Brut** is made out of 80% pinot noir from Ay, Mareuil-Sur-Ay and Mutigny, 15% chardonnay from Cramant, Avize and Oger, and 5% meunier from Cumières. It is in a big style with plenty of toasty complexity, but it also has an elegant, small-beaded texture.



*Dan Ginsburg of  
Champagne De Meric*

We occasionally get tiny allocations of the De Meric **Cuveé Catherine de Medicis Brut**. The rest of the tiny production goes to Gerard Boyer, the best restaurant in Reims that many foodies consider the best restaurant in the world. It is also sold to Guy Savoy in Paris, a Michelin three star that is also in contention for the same honor. The wine has exquisite texture from obviously low yields and an over 8-year ageing on the lees. It has a very dense, rich pinot noir flavor but a delicate, lengthy Salon-like finish that shows off the quality of the chardonnay. Treasure it for your most special occasions.



**Tarlant** has been in the champagne business for a while—since 1687! And, although they have a healthy respect for tradition, they are also one of the most innovative growers in Champagne. The winery at Tarlant is one of the best designed and managed that I have seen anywhere in the world. I think that only

Ridge here in California has a comparable level of attention to detail and preoccupation with keeping every little parcel separate. They have 32.5 acres that they divide into 50 different plots. Since most of these plots have all three grape varieties on them, that adds up to about 150 vinifications. On top of that they use new, second-use, third-use, and neutral barrels! It makes for a wide variety of blending material to say the least. They also have four generations of winemakers (Benoit, who was born in 1976, his father Jean-Mary, grandfather Georges, and great-grandfather Louis) to argue about how to assemble that material! That debate, with the up to the minute training of Benoit, and the fantastic perspective of the older generations is an important part of what makes these wines great.



*Benoit Tarlant in Les Crayons, the vineyard that produces the  
Cuvée Louis.*

Tarlant is located in the village of Oeuilly in the heart of the valley of the Marne, and their entire vineyard is planted there, with the exception of a small, contiguous parcel in the neighboring village of Boursalt. The wines all undergo barrel ageing, most completely neutral. They also ferment a portion of their wine in oak. The wines never undergo malolactic fermentation.

The Tarlant **Brut Reserve** is a blend of '99, '98, and '97, with the two older vintages stored in wood vats prior to bottling. The varietal blend is equal parts of pinot noir, pinot meunier, and chardonnay. All of the fruit comes from hillside vineyards in Oeuilly in the Vallée de la Marne. This champagne has great power from the red grapes, but also quite a bit of zesty refreshment due to suppressed malolactic fermentation and low dosage. It is a very complete bottle of champagne.

The **Brut Zero** is a vibrant, even electric style of champagne, with no sweetness whatsoever to cloud the purity of its flavor. Unlike some other “ultra brut” champagnes, this wine has great texture and richness, mostly from a generous use of reserve wines and barrel ageing. It is exactly the same wine as the Brut Reserve, but has no sugar added at the end.

Tarlant's top of the line wine, the **Cuvée Louis Brut Prestige**, is one of the best champagnes we carry regardless of price. It is made of half chardonnay and half pinot noir from the chalkiest portion of the Tarlant family's hillside vineyards, a plot called Les Crayons. The vines are all over 35 years old, averaging 50 years. The current cuvée is a blend of equal parts 1994 and 1995 harvests. The very long ageing gives it lots of complexity, and suppression of the malo, along with the high quality old vine fruit, give it the vivacity of youth. Look for flavors of cinnamon, lightly toasted bread, and apples. The finish is dry, precise and ultra long. Hold on to your hat, this wine has it all!

### **K&L Wine Merchants**

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