

WINE News

While Prices Soar for Top-Tier Wines in Bordeaux, Burgundy and Napa Valley, Great Champagne Stays Within Reach



MAY 5, 2014 FEATURES

- 2 Direct from Champagne: Aspasia, Bonville and Lorient
- 3 2013 Vin Clair Report; Fleury and Pierre Paillard
- 4 A Visit to the House of Krug

K&L Direct: Champagne Within Reach

By Gary Westby

Value is very important to all of us of here at K&L, and when I first started my job as Champagne buyer it was my dream to bring world-class wines to my customers at affordable prices. More than 14 years later, I have met that goal. I firmly believe that our Direct Import Champagne program offers some of the best wine values from anywhere in the world. While scarcity and greed push prices ever upward in Napa Valley, Bordeaux, Burgundy and nearly all other marquee categories, pricing in Champagne has remained very stable. As a result of this and our Direct Import program, we consistently deliver high-quality Champagne—which is never inexpensive—to our customers in the \$25-\$40 range.

Directly importing allows us to dispense with the markups of export brokers, import companies and distributors. We are thus able to pay a fair price to serious producers and sell their Champagnes at a very good price to our customers. Scott Beckerley and I recently returned from what marks my 26th trip to the Champagne region to find these delicious wines. In addition to visiting our favorite DI producers, including Aspasia, Bonville and Lorient, described on page 2, we also squeezed in visits to more famous houses like Billecart-Salmon and Krug. Read on for more!



BILLECART-SALMON *The House that Deserves its Fame*

In early April, Scott and I traveled to the heart of Champagne to meet with cellarmaster Francois Domi of Billecart-Salmon. We came away extremely impressed! Billecart-Salmon is a house that deserves its fame.

Established in 1818, this family firm has worked tirelessly for nearly 200 years. The Champagnes are fresh and pure, the product of long, cold initial fermentations—the first fermentations take three weeks, more than twice the norm—and vineyard management that focuses on preserving high-quality acid in the grapes. Each

pressing is kept separate in tiny tanks until the very last moment. They champion the use of oak barrels and use more than any other producer except for Bollinger, Krug and Gratién. The barrels are all nearly or completely neutral, adding texture rather than flavor.

Their most famous Champagne is the category-defining **Billecart-Salmon Brut Rosé Champagne (750ml \$74.99; 1.5L \$169.00)**. A full 42.5 acres of Pinot Noir are farmed just to make the red wine that gives this rosé its color. Composed of 50% Chardonnay, 35% Pinot Noir and 15%

Meunier, it is elegant and dry, with just a hint of clean Pinot cherry fruit to tempt the palate.

My personal favorite is the **1999 Billecart-Salmon “Cuvée Nicolas François Billecart” NFB Brut Champagne (\$99.00)**, composed of 60% Pinot Noir and 40% Chardonnay, which displays the kind of purity and elegance many famous tête-de-cuvées promise but rarely deliver. It is telling that this has been released at 15 years old, while other houses are selling the 2006 vintage for more than twice the price.

—Gary Westby

Direct From Champagne: Aspasia, Bonville and Lorient

By Gary Westby

As I mentioned in my introduction, I recently returned from my 26th trip to Champagne. Scott and I visited many producers including three of our favorite DIs: Ariston Aspasia, Franck Bonville and Michel Lorient, profiled below. I am excited to report that a new shipment from these outstanding producers has arrived and the wines are in stock now, just in time to share with you.

Ariston Aspasia

Paul Vincent and Caroline Ariston are the couple behind Ariston Aspasia, K&L's number one selling Champagne. Every drop comes from their own vineyards, located in the tiny village of Brouillet in northwest Champagne. They were the first producer we imported directly and I can't say enough about how much I love their wines. More importantly, they are constantly improving—their 2013s were among the best of the entire trip. They have a fairly even planting of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Meunier, a few rows of the almost extinct Arbanne and Meslier, and some very rare Pinot Blanc.

The **Ariston Aspasia "Carte Blanche" Brut Champagne*** (\$27.99) is our best-selling Champagne in terms of repeat sales, and if you have not tried it, you should! Its toasty quality is achieved the honest way, with five years of aging on the lees before release. Composed of 40% Chardonnay, 30% Pinot Noir and 30% Meunier, it's in perfect balance, with breadly richness from lees aging and refreshing zip from the Chardonnay. I love this Champagne. It's far better than many of the big name labels that sell for \$45 dollars or more.

The whole Aspasia range is terrific, from the open-knit and far too easy-to-drink **Ariston Aspasia Blanc de Blancs Brut Champagne*** (\$34.99), to the painstakingly crafted, dry and satisfying **Ariston Aspasia Brut Rosé Champagne*** (\$32.99) and the micro-production, barrel-aged, old vine **Ariston Aspasia "Brut de Fut" Champagne*** (\$59.99). No Champagne lover should miss their top-of-the-line **Ariston Aspasia "Cepages d'Antan" Brut Champagne*** (\$99.00), made from a single mixed-press load of Arbanne, Meslier and Pinot Blanc. This electric, exotic, nearly infinitely long-finishing masterpiece is one of the very best Champagnes that we sell at any price.

Franck Bonville

Franck Bonville's Champagnes usually sell out before we have a chance to introduce them to new customers in our newsletters, but luckily we convinced Olivier to give us a bigger allocation this year. Everything Bonville produces comes from 50 acres of exclusively Grand Cru estate-grown Chardonnay from Avize, Oger and Mesnil. The Bonville style is crystalline, chalky and precise, displaying an elegance and finesse rarely found at such value prices.

The **Franck Bonville Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs Champagne*** (375ml \$18.99; 750ml \$34.99; 1.5L \$69.99) is an incredible statement of Chardonnay in Champagne. The current batch, based on the 2011 vintage, is the best non-vintage wine Bonville has ever released. Due to the difficulty of the harvest, all the old vine juice that would normally go into vintage, Prestige and single-vineyard expressions



Paul Vincent Ariston in Champagne Aspasia's newest plot in Brouillet.

went into this. It also contains 50% reserves from 2010, 2009 and 2008, giving it fantastic texture and maturity. It has an incredible baguette and cream nose, pinpoint streamers and a supple mouthfeel, with a chalky and refreshing finish.

The **Franck Bonville "Belles Voyes" Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne*** (750ml \$69.99; 1.5L \$139.00) is one of the classiest Champagnes we sell at any price. It comes from Olivier's very best plot, the Belles Voyes, in the mid-slope of Oger. The vines are so old that no one is exactly sure when they were planted. It is estimated between the late '20s or early '30s...making them close to 100 years old. Naturally low-yielding, these old vines make one press load of juice that is fermented in just 13 oak barrels in a special part of Olivier's cellar. The wine is very dry, receiving a dosage of only five grams per liter. Layered and intricate with oceans of complexity, I find hints of pistachio, cream and fresh bread on the nose. The rich feel in the mouth is balanced by the longest, chalkiest finish that a Champagne lover could hope for. This wine has it all—not to be missed!

Michel Lorient

We are very proud to represent the great Champagne of Michel Lorient in the U.S. He is the current president of the Independent Vignerons of Champagne and has earned his post with his incredible commitment to quality at his own estate. Located in Festigny, in the Western Marne Valley, he produces wine exclusively from his own 10.5 acres of vineyard. Certified for sustainability, Michel is crazy for his vines—he even plays music for them with speakers placed strategically in his 20 plots. He is a specialist in Champagne's native Pinot Meunier, and the wines have a round, gregarious character throughout his line.

The **Michel Lorient "Authentic" Brut Champagne*** (375ml \$16.99; 750ml \$29.99; 1.5L \$65.99), formerly "Reserve," is 100% Pinot Meunier, 50% of which is reserve wines. It has great breadth and supple richness. I love it as an apéritif—flavorful, but not overwhelming. If you have never tried pure Meunier Champagne, start here!

(Continued on page 4)

PIERRE PAILLARD *It's That Good*

It isn't often that flavor hounds seeking ripe, hedonistic wines and wine geeks loyal to the leaner, high-acid lots agree on elements of style and taste, but the Champagnes of Pierre Paillard have managed to win over both camps. Tucked away in the best sites in Bouzy, the Paillard vineyards are all Grand Cru, planted on the chalkiest of south-facing slopes. The Paillards have been farming their plots for nearly 250 years—suffice to say they know their stuff. The combination of the unique situation and aspect of these meticulously cared for vineyards makes possible the elusive synthesis of perfect ripeness and vibrant minerality present in each bottling. These are some of the highest quality Champagnes that we import, made in a style that will appeal to hedonists and wine geeks alike.

Power and grace come together as pure, crystalline fruit balanced by bracing minerality in the **Pierre Paillard Grand Cru Brut Champagne*** (750ml \$39.99; 1.5L \$79.99), a vibrant, low-dosage brut. It's delicious now and will only get better, especially if aged in magnum. The **Pierre Paillard Grand Cru Brut Rosé Champagne*** (\$49.99) is refined,

yet approachable, bursting with berry fruit and spice that opens with air. Its delicate balance of ripeness and minerality makes an ideal match with seafood.

Finally, from a top vintage, the **2004 Pierre Paillard Grand Cru Brut Vintage Champagne*** (\$59.99) is complex and flavorful, with nutty richness and the most incredible chalky finish. Superb now... sublime in 10 more years.

Whatever your style, I am confident you will find something to love in Paillard Champagne. It's that good.

—Kyle Kurani



CHAMPAGNE FLEURY *Braving Biodynamics*

Sitting on the 49th parallel, the wine-growing world's most northerly edge, frigid temperatures and the risk of disease are only a few of the challenges that face growers in Champagne. They have historically turned to technology and the use of pesticides to farm productively in this temperamental place. It wasn't until an aspiring astronomer took over his family's Champagne house in 1962 that the seemingly impossible idea of growing grapes biodynamically in Champagne became a reality.

Jean-Pierre Fleury began the transition from historical farming practices to organic methods in the early 1970s. Inspired by how practices like manual tilling and composting yielded more robust soils and healthier grapes, Jean-Pierre began a trial of biodynamic farming and eventually fully converted in 1992. The Fleury Champagnes showcase the unique flavors and intensity that defines the house style, but also express the particular characteristics of soil and terroir.

The **Fleury "Carte Rouge" Blanc de Noirs Brut Champagne*** (375ml \$21.99; 750ml \$39.99) is exceptional Champagne that anyone skeptical of biodynamic wines must try. Elegantly balancing delicacy and richness, this has intense strawberry and black cherry aromas with hints of toasted yeast. It's surprising the dosage is so low, considering how ripe and expressive the fruit is throughout the wine.

The influence of Fleury's proximity to Burgundy is most noticeable in the **Fleury Brut Rosé Champagne*** (\$49.99), composed of 100% Pinot Noir. It is made into a rosé by leaving the skins in contact with the juice during fermentation. Rosés made this way tend to be more robust and tannic, but Fleury's organic practices yield healthy and delicate grape skins, resulting in a rosé that is complex yet refined. The pleasant interplay between bright acidity, elegant Pinot fruit and subtle herbaceousness transports you to Burgundy.

—Mari Keilman

2013 Vin Clair Tasting Report

On our recent trip to Champagne, Gary Westby and I sampled the 2013 *vin clair* from our small-estate producers. *Vin clair* is the term for the base wines in Champagne production prior to blending and secondary fermentation. I have tasted *vin clair* before, but never so many in one trip. They are not for the faint of palate!

Although 2013 was a "nail-biter" of a vintage, it is of magnificent quality and will be declared. Chardonnay did particularly well, along with Pinot Meunier. Here are some 2013 *vin clair* tasting highlights:

Michel Lorient's Pinot Meunier-based *vin clair* showed rich scents of white flowers and pears, balanced acidity and nice fleshiness. My favorite was the 2013 Pinot Meunier from Le Breuil. Astounding!

At Amaury Coutelas (now Damien Coutelas), they were floral but the Chardonnay and Meunier offerings showed more stone fruit and citrus notes. The on-site Pinot Meunier sample was especially powerful. Look for the new releases, which will be on their way soon.

The Côte de Blancs *vin clair* were stunning and Franck Bonville had gorgeous examples full of key lime, minerals, saline and crème fraîche.

Over at Launois, lemon curd, cream, nectarine, honeysuckle and yellow fruits abounded. The Launois delicacy is there, though the styles ranged from the classic 2013 Corroie Blanc de Blanc to the richer 2013 Mesnil Chestillan Plaine. Looks like we will be blessed with fantastic wines from Launois for years to come.

Other notable 2013s came from Pierre Paillard, Michel Arnould, Elisabeth Goutorbe, and our old friends at Ariston, who will be putting out an exquisite "Cepages d'Antan" and stunning Brut Rosé from the 2013 harvest.

In the meantime, new wines from all of these producers are on their way, so don't miss out.

—Scott Beckerley

The Gold Standard: A Visit to the House of Krug

By Scott Beckerley

Prior to our spring Champagne buying trip, I was asked which **Grande Marque** houses I would like to visit. The first word out of my mouth was “Krug.” I have loved Krug Champagne for many years. I guess that makes it three decades, now that I have my AARP card...

We managed to get an early (8 a.m.!) appointment at Champagne Krug in Reims. The Krug “wagon,” a historical converted Rolls Royce, greeted us in the courtyard and, once inside, we were met by Hospitality Manager Julie Murez, who gave us a brief history of Krug. We were served a glass of **Krug “Grande Cuvée” Brut Champagne (\$149.99)** and some chocolate croissants—best breakfast in France, so far!

Founded by Joseph Krug in 1843, Krug Champagne is renowned for its quality, complexity and finesse. Paul Krug succeeded his father in 1866 and he, in turn, was succeeded by his son, Joseph II in 1910. Now, multiple generations later, Olivier Krug is the House Director. In the last few years, Krug has leapt headfirst into the 21st century. All Krug Champagnes now have codes on the bottles to allow the consumer to visit the Krug website and trace the history of their bottle and see which cuvées it contains.

Krug’s “Grande Cuvée” is the primary objective of the house and the vintage wines are chosen only when the timing is right. We learned that the 2013 vintage-based “Grand Cuvée” will be made from 146 individual wines! Krug only uses oak barrels; stainless steel is for exclusively for temporary storage. The oldest barrel at Krug dates back to 1964, which was a stellar year for Champagne (and births). They do not filter, and once the barrels are deemed to be unusable, they are destroyed. Krug is only .01 percent of all Champagne produced, so as you can guess, it is most precious.



We toured the entire facility, including the “ancient” cellar, with vintages going back to the late 1800s. In a private tasting room, we re-tasted the “Grande Cuvée” along with two vintage wines. The “Grande Cuvée” had the ever-classic, clean nose of citrus and toasted nuts, with hints of minerals and lemons. The mid-palate fleshed out with more nuts and red fruit. The chalk came out on the finish, which, in true Krug style, lingered and lingered.



Scott and Gary with Krug Cellar Master, Eric Lebel.

The next wine—a super surprise to me—was the **2003 Krug Brut Champagne (\$229.00)**. The nose was rich, toasty and nut-dominated. The citrus shone through and the finish was just breathtaking and alive. This is best 2003 vintage Champagne I have ever tasted. Our last selection was the **2000 Krug Brut Champagne (\$199.00)**, which had a more muted nose than the 2003 but was no less interesting. Golden apple fruit and brioche came forth after a little air time. Additional nutty and crème caramel flavors also came forward. The finish was restrained with chalk and mineral notes.

All of this by 9:30 a.m.! Thank you, Krug.

(Continued from page 2)

The **2007 Michel Loriot “Monodie Meunier” Brut Champagne Extra Brut* (\$49.99)** inspires me every time I drink it. A truly affordable luxury, it is rare to find single vineyard, ancient vine Champagne from top producers at this price. It comes from the l’Arpent plot, planted in 1942, and is also made from only one press load. This deep, spicy, exotic Champagne has a ton of power and goes exceptionally well with aged Parmigiano-Reggiano. It also cellars very well. Last year I drank the 1964, one of the best wine experiences of my life!

—Gary Westby

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