



s synonymous with celebration and success—but have its festive detracted from its status as a fine wine in its own right? Drawing on late knowledge of a classic but rapidly changing region, Michael Edwards takes an historically different approach in this unrivalled, terroir-based guide to sparkling wines. Ninety in-depth profiles of the best small growers as well as the houses are organized geographically—from the finest producers of Reims and the wine towns of Epernay and Ay, to the leading villages of the Côte des Bar. Edwards also discusses the current and rising trends in viticulture and winemaking, and investigates the current crisis of success in a region that cannot satisfy its wine lovers. Additional sections explore the gastronomic traditions of pairing Champagne with food, survey the vintages of the best wines with the best price-to-quality ratio, and more, making this a true connoisseur's guide to the most glamorous and iconic of French wines.



*Champagne* is part of a major new series of illustrated guides created by the editors of *Fine Wine* magazine, working with leading authorities who give you a classic region's producers, vineyards, and vintages. Adopting the definition of wine, these innovative studies focus on "the wines most worth talking about", the houses of greatest interest to the growing number of serious wine lovers by name under the vines and behind the vines—not only what they taste like but why they reflect the particular places, people, and times that made them.



# THE FINEST WINES OF CHAMPAGNE

MICHAEL  
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Aurum



# THE FINEST WINES OF CHAMPAGNE

A Guide to the Best Cuvées, Houses, and Growers

MICHAEL EDWARDS

Foreword by Hugh Johnson | Photography by Jon Wyand

## Canard-Duchêne

Ludes is a pretty Montagne premier cru, with views over vines and meadows to Reims Cathedral. It is also home to Canard-Duchêne, the leading *maison* in a village with several fine growers. Founded in 1868 by the per Victor Canard and his *vigneronne* wife Annie, the firm took off at the turn of the 20th century when their dynamic son Edmond became plier of Champagne to Tsar Nicolas I and the Russian Court—a proud connection still recalled by the double-eagle crest of the Romanoffs that adorns the firm's motif. Edmond's son, another tator, was also a great and far-sighted wine man, who saw earlier than his rivals the potential for excellent Pinot Noir from the Aube in a good ampagne blend. As someone who represented house in sales trips to the USA in the 1970s, I remember Victor fondly, as both a wonderful host and a purveyor of elegant wines, so typical of a family business.

Yveuve Clicquot acquired the house a decade later, and as much as I admire the Widow's ampagnes, those of its junior Canard partner I thought a rough patch in the mid-1990s. In 1994, I was worried enough to write of the entry-level Brut: "[T]his wine had a suspiciously deep, red colour and a coarse flavour ... (on two occasions)." Fortunately, things looked up with the arrival of a Pétiers protégé, Jean Dubarry, who headed up the Brut cuvée to match the Vintage ones, which have always been perfectly decent. In better times arrived when the house was sold in 2003 to entrepreneur Alain Thiénot. Alain is always a force for good in Champagne, a former ne broker who knows the vineyards like the back of his hand—a reassuring talent allied to his nous ability to read a balance sheet of figures rather than anyone else!

With Canard's entry into the Alain Thiénot coup, the thrust of its sales strategy in its target markets is a mixture of consolidation and change.

Traditionally, Canard is not an expensive Champagne. It is always meant to be an easy style of wine, stressing fruit, vitality and cleansing acidity. Its customer base remains the French domestic market, that of the *coupe* served on the zinc bar. The management is, however, looking to tap the nascent markets of Eastern Europe and the fun-loving islands of the Caribbean. Apparently, Guadeloupe, which is still a *département* of France, has the highest per capita consumption of Champagne in the world—an isle of lotus eaters, where Canard has a strong presence.

The current range of Champagnes draws both Pinots and Chardonnays from 60 communes on a broad canvas: Ludes on the Grande Montagne; the Marne Valley; the Côte des Blancs; Sézanne, of course; but also quite a significant proportion from the Aube, which provides bright, early-maturing black grapes.

The entry-level Brut is a clean, fresh wine, round yet crisp, majoring on fruitiness rather than complexity. The Vintage cuvée shows good, leesy, mature flavour and is great value. But Canard's trump card is the Charles VII Grande Cuvée Blanc de Blancs, at once buttery, toasty, and floral. The Rosé version steers a confident middle path between voluptuousness and the fresh juiciness of orchard fruits such as cherry and peach.

### FINEST WINE

(Tasted in Reims, July 2008)

**Canard-Duchêne Grande Cuvée Charles VII**

A multi-vintage, prestige, all-Chardonnay cuvée, and as such a comparative rarity. Evolving well: mature Chardonnay aromas and flavours of butter, toast and white flowers. Very good balance. This release will hold well to 2011/2012.

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## Vilmart & Cie

Vilmart was one of the estates setting the gold standard for grower Champagnes in the late 20th century. What struck me when I first met René Champs and his son Laurent in the early 1990s was their infinite painstaking capacity. On their 17ha (27 acres) of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in Rilly-la-Montagne, they preferred a hand hoe for tilling the soils between the rows of vines, and no chemicals were used. "Respecting our natural environment develops exceptional flavours in our wines" were their watchwords then. They have since become the received wisdom of eco-friendly growers everywhere.

Now firmly at the helm, Laurent Champs directs everything with meticulous care. The wines are fermented in oak casks, most being large *foudres*. His perfectionist approach pays off best in his top-of-the-line Vintage Champagnes based on old vines of 40-50 years of age. The Non-Vintage cuvées are relatively simple wines by comparison. Essentially, Vilmart, like Rolly Gassmann in Alsace, are brilliant winemakers, but they do not have any grand cru vineyards, and this shows at the entry level.

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The Grande Réserve NV (70/30 Pinot Noir/Chardonnay) spends ten months in *foudres*, the straw-gold hue shaped by the time in oak. It shows simple green-apple fruit but is round in the mouth and of decent length. The Grand Cellier cuvée represents a clear step forward. Made from three vintages (currently 2004, '05, and '06), a third of the blend comes from Montagne Chardonnay, rounded and *gras*, shaping attractive scents of tangerine and lemon. Ample Pinot Noir fills the palate to



Above: Making stained glass is another craft René Champs practises with great skill, though the theme here is the same

finish a Champagne that is both a fine apéritif and good for the table.

Up again to the Vintage Grand Cellier d'Or, and we are now at the very fine level of Champagnes that made the house's reputation. They are as good as I always remember them. The Cellier d'Or 2002 is a beauty in the making. Dominated by Chardonnay (80 per cent) the nose is subtle, complex, and exceptionally well balanced. In the mouth, orchard fruits like apricot meld with luxurious buttery brioche flavours, finishing on a note of fine, life-giving acidity. It will give enormous pleasure from around 2012. The 2000 is in a different style—more delicate, with exemplary finesse and already *à point*.

The line reaches its apogee in the vintages of Coeur de Cuvée. As the name implies, the wines are made from the best part, the "heart" (or first pressings) of the *cuvée*. They are fermented in 225-litre barriques. The wood can dominate this

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great wine for several years until it approaches its maturity, but from about 9–13 years of age, it shows great class and new complexities every time you taste it. So give it plenty of air—or better still, decant and serve it in wine glasses rather than flutes.

A newly introduced blend, the Cuvée Creation, is another take on Chardonnay-dominated Champagne. More fine drawn, it is a summer wine, with restoring notes of lime and delicate touches of vanilla, made for great, subtly sauced sea fish like Turbot or John Dory.

## **FINEST WINES**

*(Tasted in Rilly-la-Montagne, January 2009)*

### **Vilmart & Cie Cœur de Cuvée 2000**

From the oldest (50-year-old) vineyards of the terroir; 80% C, 20% PN, all premier cru. Fermented and aged for ten months in barriques. Very fine, ripe, golden colour, shimmering; a real robe. Hazelnuts add a fine touch of soaring fresh fruit on the nose. Ample and luxuriant in the mouth, this Champagne has fine definition of vinous but balanced flavours. The wood is now quite integrated. Worth keeping, especially in magnums, until 2012.

### **Vilmart & Cie Cœur de Cuvée 1999**

Expressive, up-front fruitiness, but there is a certain abruptness, a lean, linear character behind, that pales by comparison with the generous and complete 2000. Others may disagree, but this wine confirms my view that 1999 is not a great vintage.

### **Vilmart & Cie Cœur de Cuvée 1998**

Chardonnay was particularly successful in 1998, especially when as well cared for and selected as it was here. A really subtle wine—still tightly coiled but slowly revealing all the mineral loveliness and exquisite acidity melded with generous fruit that is the signature of the vintage.

**Left:** Laurent Champs has now taken over from his father René and shares his perfectionist approach to winemaking

### **Champagne Vilmart & Cie**

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