

CHAMPAGNE



Champagne by the Glass

Tunnelled beneath the handsome architectural façades of Reims and Epernay is a subterranean world of work: kilometre after kilometre of branching cellars, lined with millions of bottles, stacked by hand and layered one on top of another, like logs in a woodpile. The still wine that enters these vaults soon becomes starred with bubbles, but the transformation that gives Champagne its nutritious, yeasty, dough-like aroma only emerges after years of cellaring.

Harvest comes to Champagne in September, just as the summer is winding down into autumn. For three hectic weeks Champagne's population swells by 60,000, as legions of students, gypsies, executives, and cellar workers bare the strain of bringing in the grapes. At night, this transient work force, full of food, wine, music and fatigue loudly occupies the streets, creating the impression of a newly forming, fecund, nocturnal world. Champagne is synonymous with luxury, but the soft warmth and *joie de vivre* of these late summer nights also reminds us why it has become such a spirited monument to good French living.

	GLASS
Laurent-Perrier Brut NV	16
Louis Roederer Brut Premier NV	19
Laurent-Perrier Rosé	24
Ruinart Blanc de Blanc	25

Les Apéritifs

Champagne's gentle, glimmering apéritif wines marvellously invert the region's dour backdrop of hard rock and sullen light, like a photographic negative blazoned onto celluloid. Laurent-Perrier NV epitomises this style: delicate, yet flavourful, its fine textural weave vigorously unspooling into filaments of tiny, brilliant bubbles.

	BOTTLE
Laurent-Perrier Brut NV	80
Pol Roger NV	90
Georges Laval 1er Cru Brut Nature NV	135

Rosé

Rosé Champagne is the ultimate test of the blender's art. Try and blend too much red wine into Champagne, or macerate the grapes for too long, and the elements never really combine, as with oil being dripped into water. At Billecart-Salmon, small additions of still Pinot Noir add extra dimensions of colour and flavour, without ever compromising the gentle impact of the underlying blend.

	BOTTLE
Laurent-Perrier Cuvée Rosé NV	140
Bollinger Rosé NV	160
Billecart-Salmon "Cuvée Elisabeth Salmon" 2000	320

Blanc de Blancs

The east facing chalky slopes of the Côtés des Blancs are Chardonnay's home, and source of the region's prized and elegant Blanc de Blancs Champagnes. Chardonnay

is the vine variety most sensitive to the return of light and warmth to the vineyards in spring, fattening its buds from early March. Without the easterly aspect the new growth might perish to frost, but the gentle incline helps gather in the warmth of the morning sun, and protects the emerging shoots as they tiptoe their way, leaf-by-leaf, into each new season.

BOTTLE

Le Mesnil Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs	100
Ruinart Blanc de Blancs NV	135
Ulysse Colin Blanc de Blancs NV	130
Vouette et Sorbée "Blanc d'Argile"	130
Jacquesson Avize Grand Cru 2000	165
Billecart-Salmon Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs	150

Fuller Styles

Customarily, blends between grape varieties dutifully pull-together, like suburban couples; but Champagne's licit *ménage à trois* of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier is a much more combustible affair. Bollinger, Roederer and Gratien are all familiar names, but each illustrates the extraordinary boost and energy of combination that blending brings to Champagne.

	BOTTLE
Louis Roederer Brut Premier NV	90
Bollinger Special Cuvée NV	120
Louis Roederer Carte Blanche NV	85
Egly-Ouriet Blancs de Noirs "Vieilles Vignes" NV	250
Krug Grande Cuvée NV	340

Pinot Meunier

Winters in the Marne Valley and the Petite Montagne seem harder and longer than anywhere else in Champagne. The frost and fog linger, and through February and March the stunted vine trunks, stripped of leaves, line-up like sentinels, or the neat rows of crosses in the nearby war cemeteries. The early ripening Pinot Meunier is the grape variety of choice here, and each year it reliably provides wines of body and substance, that more normally round-out the edgier contributions of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

	BOTTLE
Comte Stanislas NV	75
Egly-Ouriet "Les Vignes de Vrigny"	110
Jérôme Prévost Brut Nature "La Closerie les Béguines"	160

Vintage Wines

In contrast to the delicacy of apéritif Champagnes, young vintage wines have a protective austerity that can take years to shake-off. Although the majority of vintage wines are blended, it is the grandeur and power of Pinot Noir from the Montagne de Reims that persuades most producers to bottle cuvées from individual years. Wines from the mid-to-late nineties are now starting to peak, though a few - Billecart's Cuvée Nicholas Francois Billecart, and Bollinger's Grande Année - seemingly come with the gift of perpetual life.

	BOTTLE
Laurent-Perrier 2004	140
Alfred Gratien 1998	130
Veuve Clicquot 2004	150
Louis Roederer 2007	195
Bollinger Grande Année 2004	220

Luxury Cuvées

The strength of brands like Cristal and Dom Perignon derives from their being able to create and satisfy our appetite for luxury. Consistency is everything. Those looking for greater individuality will find Selosse's "Substance", Laurent-Perrier's "Grand Siècle", and Billecart-Salmon's "Le Clos" full of surprises and subtleties.

Anselme Selosse has a playful approach to his craft, and the Domaine's eccentric, solera-aged blends show that the 'champagnisation' of still wine to sparkling is anything but bland high school chemistry. "Substance" was a revelation: swarms of bubbles, bursting in isolation, the flavours rippling out like the pulses of a minute exploding star. Over the top? Yep! But we loved it!

	BOTTLE
Laurent-Perrier "Grand Siècle"	300
Dom Perignon 2004	335
Jacques Selosse "Substance"	400
Bollinger RD 1996	480
Louis Roederer "Cristal" 2004	400
Krug 1995	585
Billecart-Salmon "Le Clos St Hilaire" 1996	600
Krug "Clos d'Ambonnay" 1995	4100