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A view of the *lieu-dit* Croix de Cramant as it slopes down towards the village

TWELVE BITS OF DIRT

GH MUMM'S CUVÉE R LALOU

Has GH Mumm found its soul again? Tom Stevenson believes so, even though he once wrote that “it took more than 160 years to build Mumm’s reputation, and less than a decade to demolish it.” After tracking Mumm’s recent renaissance, he tells the ups and downs from behind the scenes of its 11-year quest to establish a special new prestige cuvée—Cuvée R Lalou—as the cornerstone of its 21st-century reputation

All maps and photography courtesy of Champagne GH Mumm

Lionel Breton eyed me from across the table at L’Assiette Champenoise and declared, “I heard that you once refused to visit Mumm.” It was not so much a statement, as an invitation to elaborate, so I replied: “That’s not true. I refused to visit Mumm many times.”

Breton—a Pernod Ricard man, and the chairman and CEO of Martell Mumm Perrier Jouët—nodded for me to continue. The truth is I didn’t want to do anything at that particular moment other than savor Arnaud Lallement’s heavenly Asperge Verte de Robert Blanc, but Breton had finished his trio of asparagus and obviously had other ideas.

The story began, I told him, with repeated efforts by Mumm in the mid-1990s to get me to visit their new facilities. I had dropped in on Mumm several times throughout the early to mid-1980s, but by the time they were pestering me, I had a backlog of growers on my must-visit list and absolutely no incentive to see Mumm while it was churning out Champagne I could not drink, let alone recommend. I had been one of Mumm’s most vociferous critics since the late 1980s. On a good day, Mumm Cordon Rouge smelled of sauerkraut (heavy-handed malolactic), while on a bad day it reeked of boiled cabbage (mercaptan).

All efforts by Mumm in France had failed, so they dumped the task on Rob Whitaker, Seagram’s brand manager for Mumm in the UK. He asked me if there was anything he could do to convince me that things had moved sufficiently in the right direction at Mumm to warrant another visit. Whitaker pointed out that Mumm had accepted there was a quality issue as early as 1991, since when a fortune had been spent on new facilities to rectify the problem. I told him the only thing he could do was to send me two samples of each shipment of non-vintage Cordon Rouge as soon as it reached the UK, and get Mumm to do the same with every release on to the French market. I’ll taste one of these double samples and cellar the other. If and when I see an improvement in the bottle over two or three consecutive shipments, I’ll retaste all the seconds in chronological order, and should that demonstrate a distinct change for the better, I will happily visit Mumm again. He accepted the challenge, the process went on for four years, and in 1998 I made my first visit in more than a decade.

The clean-up

According to my tasting notes, it is clear that the quality began to deteriorate in 1982, when Mumm began to drift from its famed fresh and fragrant style, with its typically light and fluffy mousse, to something rather dull and foursquare. Looking back at the changes in cellar masters, it is quite easy to see who was responsible for this pattern of events. Certainly not Jacques Barot, who was in charge from 1945 to 1964 and produced most of Mumm’s greatest postwar vintages, including all of my favorites (1949, 1955, 1961, and 1964). He was followed by Bernard Geoffroy, who was the *chef de caves* from 1965 until 1981, and who must be credited for some vintages that almost matched the best of Barot’s wines, particularly in the 1970s. These are the vintages of Mumm I enjoyed throughout my research for *Champagne* (Sotheby’s Publications, 1986). Geoffroy was succeeded by André Carré, who once worked for Krug, but by the time he arrived at Mumm he had lost the plot. Carré cast his shadow over Mumm from 1982 until 1991. The only top-quality Champagne he produced was the one-off prestige cuvée Mumm de Mumm 1982. Yet the straight 1982 was Mumm’s first dubious vintage, even in magnum. How can anyone be that

inconsistent? God only knows what he did. Perhaps he simply could not make the transition from the small-scale volume of big, rich, hugely complex, non-malolactic Champagne at Krug to (what should have been) the light, refreshing, tremendously elegant, gently malolactic style at Mumm. With the first 1982-based non-vintage cuvées appearing on the market from 1985, and the following vintages getting progressively worse, most UK wine critics had started to savage Mumm’s reputation by the late 1980s.

The bad press was at its height in the early 1990s, but unbeknown to most of us, the turnaround in quality that encouraged me to resume visiting in 1998 was stimulated by changes that took place as early as 1991. What kick-started Mumm’s sea change in quality was the appointment of Jean-Marie Barillière as director of research and viticulture and enology. In a private conversation with me, Jean-Claude Rouzaud of Roederer spoke very highly about Barillière, and that is as good a third-party reference as anyone could hope for in Champagne. Carré retired (or was retired?), and his assistant, Pierre-Yves Harang, took over, only to be handed the unenviable task of clearing out the worst of Carré’s mess. Harang was helped by Barillière, who ripped out the cement vats, building a new cuverie, with state-of-the-art fermentation and *assemblage* technology. He also forked out for a revolutionary computerized disgorging line. In 1995, these technological enhancements enabled Mumm to become the first global *grande marque* to receive ISO 9002 certification. Such certification is a complex issue, but for those of us on the receiving end, this guarantees no defects in the wines, a continuity of style, and stricter control on the quality of supplier products, most importantly grapes and corks. It goes without saying that ISO cannot guarantee quality in its most meaningful sense, but it was those “ISO 9002 certified” fault-free 1995 base wines that I had tasted in 1998 and that had precipitated my first visit to Mumm in almost a decade.

New standards, new owners

But 1995 proved to be the turning point for Mumm in more ways than one. Not only had Barillière built new production facilities, he had also assumed responsibility for the production of Mumm, and his first major decision in this role was to give a young winemaker by the name of Dominique Demarville a relatively free hand to make the wines that year. Demarville had joined Mumm the year before, and although Harang was still technically the *chef de caves*, the 1995s were essentially Demarville’s wines, as indeed were the ’96s and ’97s, even though Demarville was not officially appointed cellar master until January 1998.

In 1996, Mumm finally sold Heidsieck & Co Monopole, a once-great brand that had become a drag on Mumm’s finite viticultural resources. The relief this brought to Mumm’s supply situation was so evident in the wines of 1997 and ’98 that it was almost palpable on the palate. The more I look back, the more impressed I am by the foresight and courage of Barillière’s decision to appoint Demarville, at just 31 years of age, as the youngest ever cellar master of a large *grande marque* house. On the face of it, giving Demarville the power, but not the position, in 1995 might seem even more daring, but that was something he could have covered up had it gone wrong. Once appointed, though, the gloves were off, and Demarville had to perform—otherwise both of them would have got the bullet. That Demarville did perform is now part of Mumm’s recent, dazzling history.



Some of the new oak barrels that Mumm has been using for the first time

In 2000, Seagram sold Mumm and Perrier Jouët to Hicks Muse Tate & Furst, a private Texan investment company, which sold the two houses on to Allied Domecq in January 2001. An indication that the new owners were even more supportive of the quality strategy was the appointment of Barillière as managing director of both Mumm and Perrier Jouët in 2002, and the promotion of Demarville to director of wines and vines, for both Mumm and Perrier Jouët, in 2003—a position that included a seat on the board.

Having heard how young and gifted Demarville is, it might be surprising to discover that in December 2006 Demarville left such a highly prestigious position to serve as number two at Veuve Clicquot. The fact is that he was head-hunted to take over from Jacques Peters, and Demarville told me several years ago that Peters was his winemaking idol. Such is Demarville's humility that, despite holding such a top job, he knew he still had much to learn. And such is his wisdom and honesty to himself that he gave up the status of one of the most powerful winemaking positions in

Champagne to study under Peters for three years. He told me that it was a very hard decision to leave Mumm, but an extremely simple decision to accept Veuve Clicquot's offer: "Jacques Peters was going to retire, it was literally a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It would never be repeated. How could I refuse?"

Didier Mariotti

Assistant cellar master at Mumm since 2003, Mariotti has had a much smoother transition to the top job than Demarville, who had to help Harang clear up. One of Mariotti's positions before joining Mumm was at Moët & Chandon, where his personal project was to investigate the effects of microoxygenation of both juice and wine in Champagne. This is totally different from the use of microoxygenation for softening tannins in red wines. It has more to do with the accurate measurement of optimum oxygen requirements of the yeast for a particular vat of wine to produce a smooth, trouble-free fermentation. This is one of the hot topics in Champagne today, especially following the trials and tribulations of the 2003 harvest, where Moët used these measurements to reduce sulfur levels despite the highest pH levels on record. Mariotti is therefore well positioned to adapt Mumm to the best 21st-century Champagne.

The first vintage of Cuvée R Lalou that Mariotti will be responsible for from start to finish is the 2006, of course. However, a lot of the work spent on developing the style of this new Champagne has centered on the *dosage*, and Mariotti has been responsible for the *dosage* since the first release of the 1998 Cuvée R Lalou. By *dosage*, I do not refer simply to the amount of sugar (both 6g and 8g work well with the 1998, but Mariotti has gone for 6g, which is a wise decision for a Champagne that will be targeting sommeliers): I refer also to the base wine used for the *dosage*. For this, they have been trialing Chardonnay from Cramant, Pinot Noir from Bouzy, and vinification in both stainless steel and *barriques*. It is the first time that Mumm has used oak for 35 years, and the first time that Mumm has ever used new oak.

There are so many different factors involved in tweaking the *dosage*, but suffice to say that as a rule of thumb the earliest releases of each Cuvée R Lalou vintage will be *dosaged* with a *barrique*-fermented liquor, while the final releases will have a stainless-steel-fermented liquor. Mariotti, who is heavily committed to exploring the ways in which the *dosage* can influence the final product, explains: "When one reaches a certain level of perfection, as the grands crus allow us to do, one then seeks to perfect that perfection."

The search for dirt

No sooner had Demarville got his hands on the controls at Mumm in 1995—albeit without the full responsibility of the position of cellar master—than he was like a child in a candy store. He began plotting a special cuvée, but Harang was still his titular boss, and Harang was overseeing Demarville's free hand with the wines. This made it impossible for Demarville to produce a Champagne that was not then in Mumm's portfolio without Harang's cooperation, so consequently both Demarville and Harang must be credited with producing the precursor to Cuvée R Lalou. The name did not exist at that juncture; nor were they consciously thinking about developing a new prestige cuvée. It was more the result of a very young mind trying to take in the fact that he was handling the grapes, juice, and wines of the third-largest producer in Champagne and wondering that surely, among all this, there must be something

truly special that he could pluck out and play with. However, no sooner did he have that thought than he realized that selection in the winery was a stage too late, because of the large size of Mumm's vats. (This led to the introduction of many smaller vats.) Both Demarville and Harang agreed that they should look at isolating the vines at village level. They considered the success of Mumm de Cramant (originally called Crémant de Cramant), and that made them consider the possibility of producing the opposite: a Blanc de Noirs. Although they quickly dismissed this in favor of something more specific, Demarville would go on to produce small quantities of Mumm de Verzenay in 1998 and 2002. (Although I'm told that this is exclusively for in-house use, with no intention to commercialize the wine, that is precisely how the Crémant de Cramant started out, so watch this space.)

Demarville and Harang put off their first attempted cuvée until 1996, so that they could conduct an in-depth appraisal of the best and oldest of Mumm's vineyards, and vinify them separately. For the 1996 they focused on just five *lieux-dits*, with a varietal mix of 55 percent Pinot Noir and 45 percent Chardonnay. To conceal their tracks from the bean counters, they tagged the wine in the computer as GC, short for Grand Cru, a name that would later be used for another new product. The 1996 was purely experimental, but it convinced Demarville that any new cuvée should be expressive of the terroir that had helped shape Mumm's formative years.

By 1998, Project GC had been officially recognized and split into two: Mumm Grand Cru (an upmarket non-vintage macroblend of grand cru villages, which is clean but has always lacked finesse, from *vins clairs* through all the stages on yeast to the finished product); and the new prestige cuvée. One of Demarville's first decisions as the new cellar master was to task himself with an intensive study of Mumm's vineyards in order to identify and isolate a number of parcels he would need for this project. The idea was not just to select sites from within the old viticultural holdings, but to discern which sites display sufficiently special characteristics that their vines stand out from the surrounding vines. He found 18 such parcels (whittled down from 27) in 12 *lieux-dits* located within eight grand cru villages; and by examining these *lieux-dits* closely, it can be seen why these particular patches of dirt were chosen.

MAILLY

Pinot Noir; northern Montagne

Les Villers: Mailly generally crops 1–5 days later than either Verzy or Verzenay, but these west-facing vines are in a particularly cold spot, and ripen even more slowly, resulting in higher acidity.

VERZENAY

Pinot Noir; northern Montagne

Les Rochelles: One of a very small number of hillocks on the northern Montagne de Reims, one side of which faces south, and is particularly well sheltered, benefiting from significantly more sunlight and reduced winds, resulting in richer wines with more finesse. There is often a peachiness in the fruit that is indicative of this *lieu-dit's* extra ripeness. Vines are mass, not clonal, selection.

Les Perthois: Another mid-slope hillock, again with mass-selected vines. Les Perthois is more west- and southwest-facing than Les Rochelles, producing wines with more minerality, but also some peachiness and, in the best years, some Christmas-cake complexity. Totally different from surrounding vines.

VERZY

Pinot Noir; northern Montagne

Les Houles: Not far from Les Perthois, on virtually the same mid-slope, but we are now in Verzy and the *montagne* has an easterly aspect. Les Houles is on the cusp of Verzenay and Verzy soils, uniquely giving the wines more structure, and less richness, the farther east the vines are located.

BOUZY

Pinot Noir; southern Montagne

Les Hannepées: Mid-slope and fully south-facing at the heart of Bouzy, these well-sheltered, low-yielding, 40-year-old mass-selected vines could not be in a more impressive location, though in the best years the wines they produce can be on the fat side. Standout wines.

AMBONNAY

Pinot Noir; southern Montagne

Les Crupots: On a well-sheltered, south- and southeast-facing mid-slope that crops earlier than surrounding vineyards, these vines produce noticeably different wines, but retain Ambonnay's distinctive strawberry character.

Aÿ

Pinot Noir; southern Montagne

Valnon: Either side of a ridge, these vines face southeast or southwest and produce distinctive wines with mandarin fruit and a nutty complexity. Totally different, standout wines.

CRAMANT

Chardonnay; Côte des Blancs

Les Perthes: East-facing mid-slopes in the bowl halfway between Cramant and Avize, these vines are sheltered from cold northerly winds by the Butte de Saran and produce rich, intensely flavored wines full of citrus fruits and minerality. Not so much different from, as more intense than, wines from surrounding vines.

La Croix de Cramant: Fully south-facing, even more sheltered than Les Perthes, yet these vines produce lighter wines with more minerality. Closer to typical Cramant, but less citrus, more mineral.

Les Bionnes: These south- and southeast-facing vines on the lower slopes tend to ripen earlier than most other areas of Cramant, producing floral-scented wines of softness and delicacy on the mid-palate, but sometimes a hardness on the finish. Some mass selection. Different, but not always for the better.

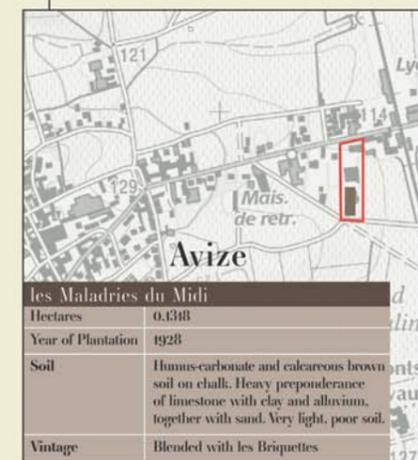
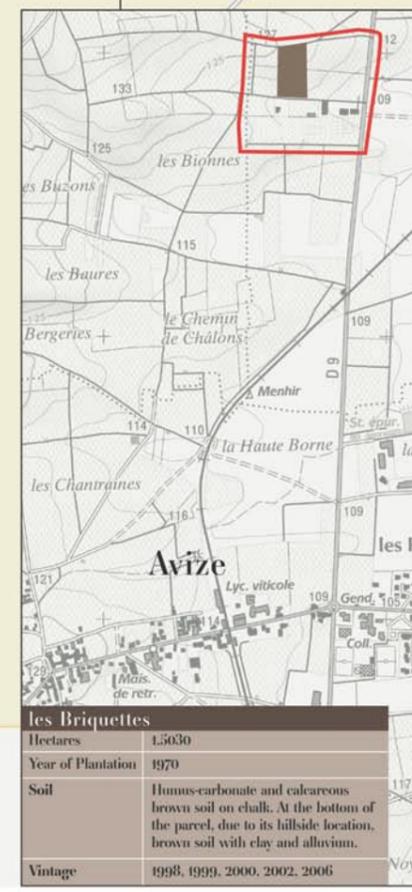
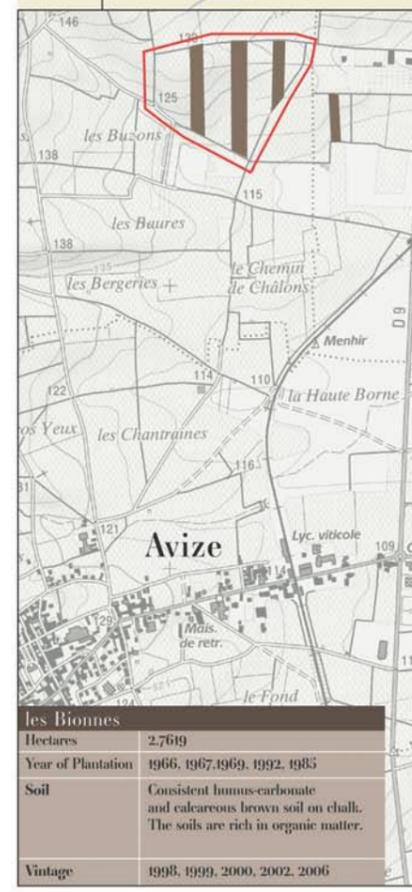
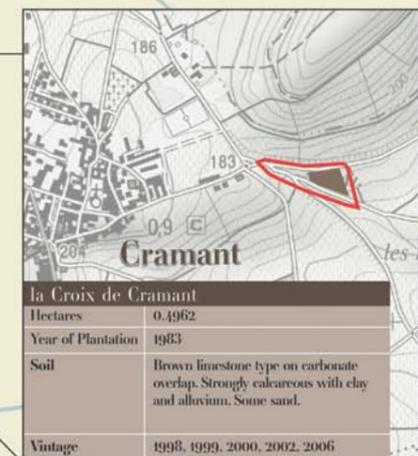
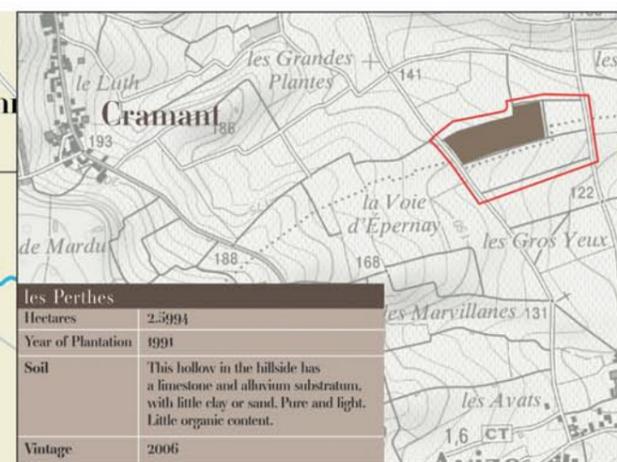
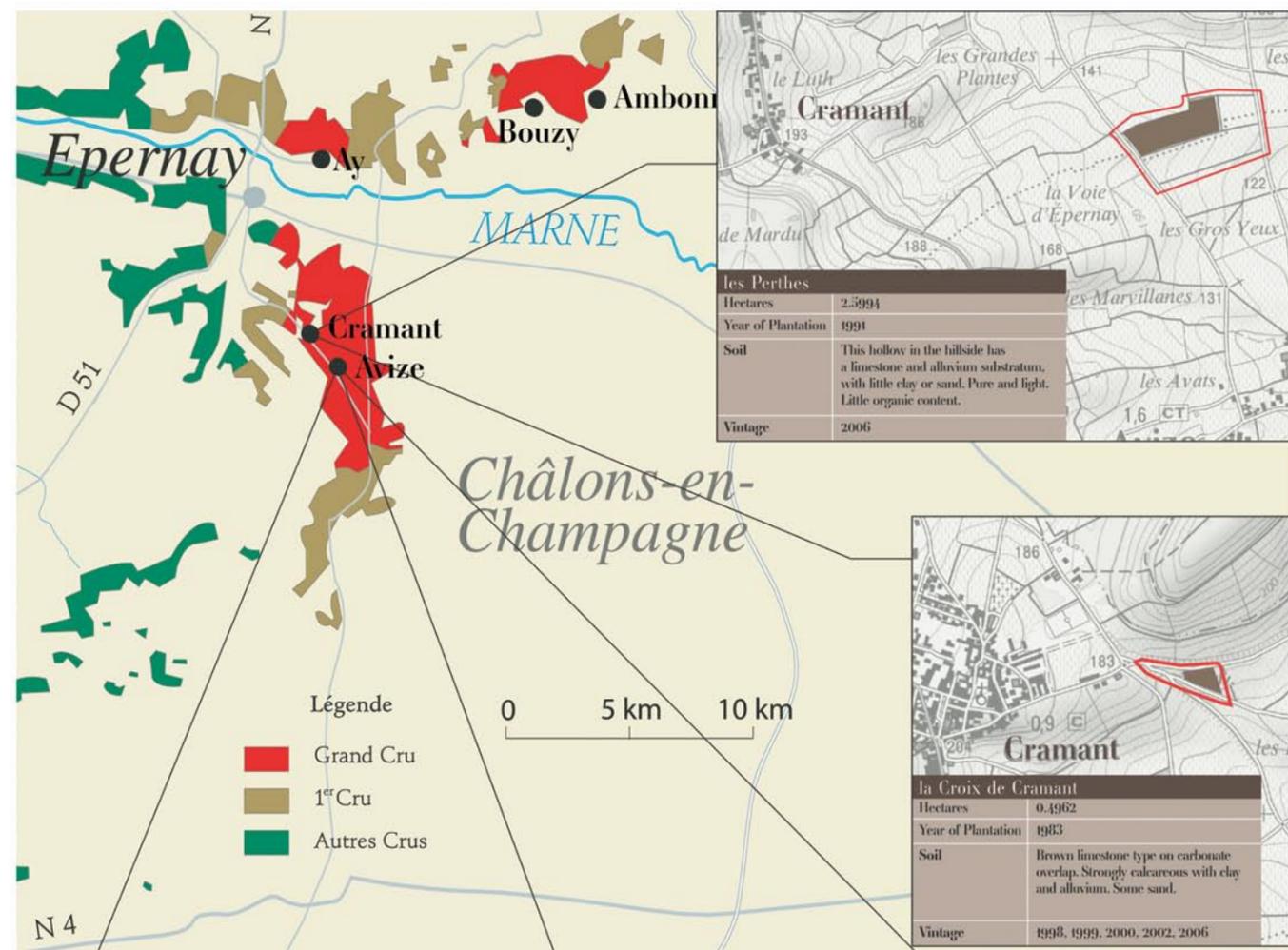
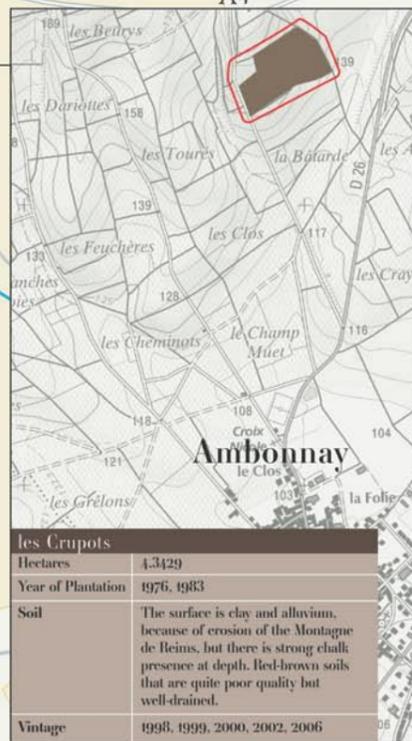
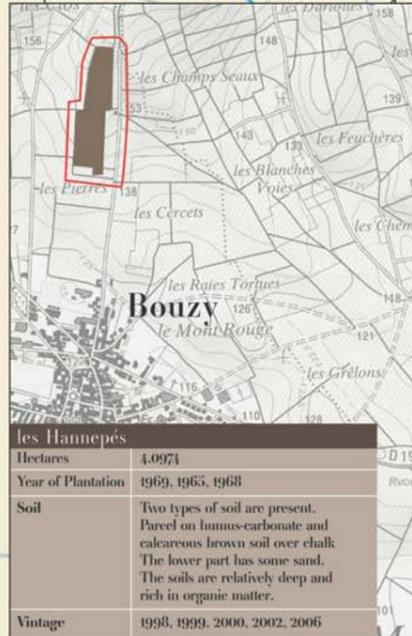
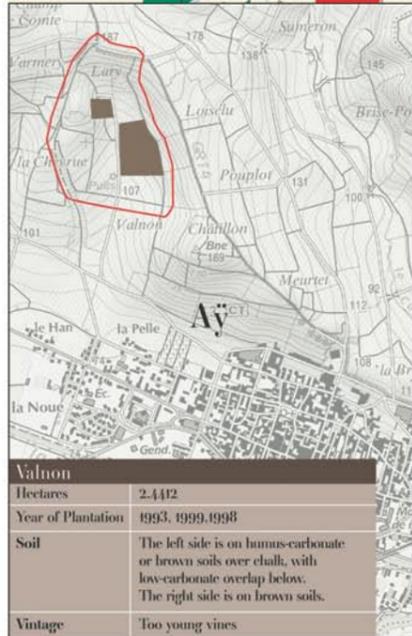
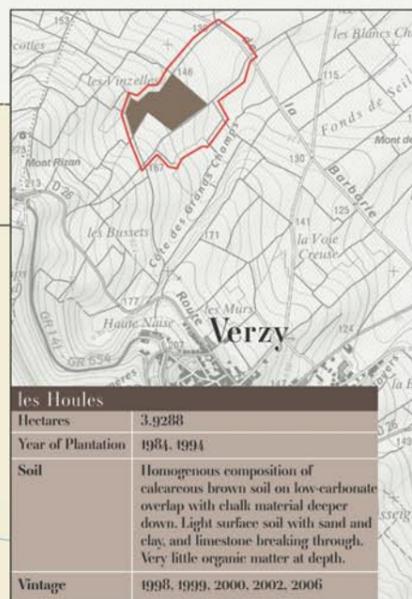
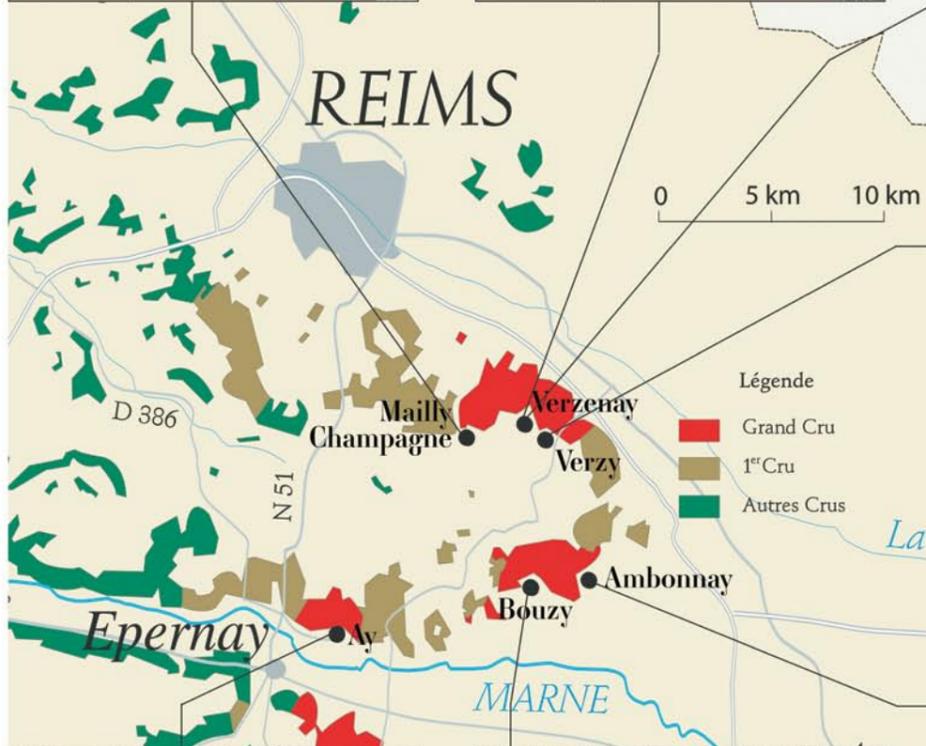
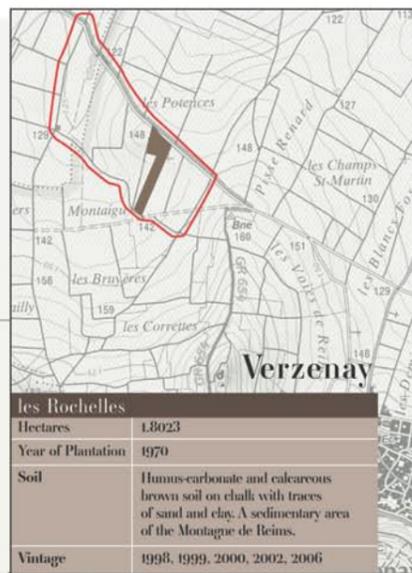
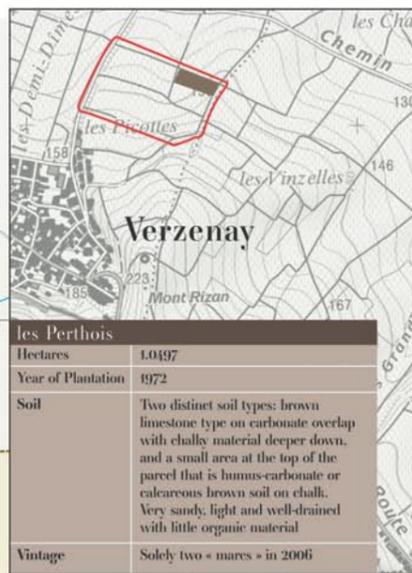
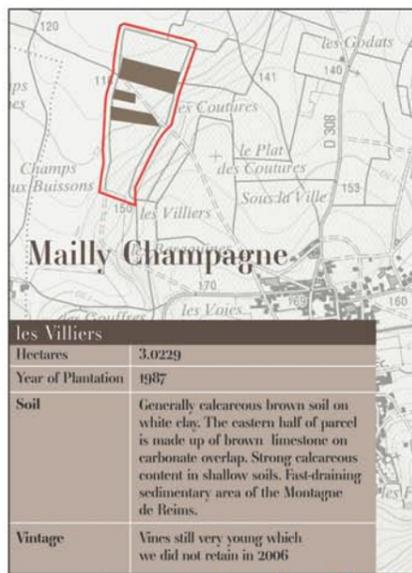
AVIZE

Chardonnay; Côte des Blancs

Les Briquettes: Although southeast-facing, these vines are located at the bottom of a slope and frost-prone, but they are all mass selection, and the accumulation of heavier soil makes a richer, creamier style of Chardonnay than the vines on superior mid-slopes.

Les Maladrès du Midi: These sheltered, fully south-facing, mass-selected vines can produce a rare combination of richness and minerality. Exceptional Avize.

The 18 parcels total just over 28ha (69 acres), which could in theory produce more than 360,000 bottles under the new maximum yield of 15,500kg/ha, but due to the age of some of the vines, their location, the method of pruning, and various other factors that Demarville introduced to enhance the quality of these



Boundary of lieu-dit Mumm's plots within the lieu dit

Boundary of lieu-dit Mumm's plots within the lieu dit



Grands crus all in a row; later releases of Cuvée R Lalou will have a stainless-steel-fermented liquor

particular vineyards, they are not likely to produce more than 240,000 bottles. Furthermore, the vintages produced so far have relied on just seven or eight of the 12 *lieux-dits*, and the amount of each *lieu-dit* used has varied according to taste at the *assemblage*. Mumm will not say how many bottles have been produced of each vintage, but a well-placed source within the company told me that they have averaged 70,000 bottles. For a *grande marque* selling 7.2 million bottles of Cordon Rouge a year, that's pretty small beer—and minute compared to some of the most famous and well-established prestige cuvées.

Naming names

Even though I have been following the evolution of this project for almost ten years, I had no idea what the name of the cuvée was going to be until my most recent visit in April 2007. Apparently, one of the names proposed and favored by quite a sizable faction at Mumm was Douze Terres. Although the connotation is obvious, it would not really have made sense, since only seven or eight *lieux-dits* are actually used for each bottling. However, that was not the in-house objection at Mumm. Douze Terres was eventually shot down when someone in the United States thought it might get nicknamed The Dirty Dozen.

My personal favorite was to resurrect Mumm de Mumm, which had been used for one very good vintage of the shortest-lived prestige cuvée in the history of Champagne, but this did not even get a look in. It would have been a natural progression from Mumm de Cramant, providing the perfect synergy should there be any future release of Mumm de Verzenay, and would have instantly conveyed in any language that the contents of the bottle represent the very best quality of Mumm. But obviously this was far too logical for Gallic minds. In the end, the overwhelming favorite was Cuvée R Lalou. I must admit that I was disappointed at first. Essentially they are using an old name for a new market of consumers who have never heard of Lalou and who have no idea even that Lalou was a person; thus, if Mumm was set on using this

name, why not spell it out? Why not Cuvée René Lalou, as the original cuvée was called? The reasoning from Mumm's point of view is that, although they want to pay homage to René Lalou and to emulate the gastronomic success of the original cuvée named after him, they also want the new cuvée to be an expression of renaissance, not a continuation of an old cuvée.

The Lalou factor

Lalou was Mumm's greatest chairman. He was born in Paris in 1877, qualified as a lawyer, and was an advocate at the Court of Appeal in Paris from 1901 to 1904. Having married into the Dubonnet family, he left his position as advocate and worked for his in-laws' family firm from 1904–20, rising first to managing director, then chairman. During World War I, he served in the army, with the Quartermaster Corps, where his particular responsibility was for wines (very French!). His duties required several visits to Champagne, and it was there he met and befriended Georges Robinet, a

French assistant of Hermann Mumm. Robinet, who had been put in temporary charge of GH Mumm following the internment of Mumm (who had been so busy selling Champagne that, unlike fellow German owners of several other Champagne houses, he had not got around to seeking French citizenship) and the confiscation of his company. By 1920, Mumm was owned by several shareholders, one of whom was Dubonnet, making Lalou the obvious choice to help his old friend Robinet run the company. Lalou was made a member of the board and devoted his first years to replanting the firm's 50ha (124 acres) of vineyards, which had been ravaged by oidium, phylloxera, and war. He was appointed vice chairman in 1929, the year when France had not only recovered its pre-war stability, but also appeared to be immune from the Great Depression that was causing havoc throughout the rest of Europe. By 1931, however, France had succumbed to the same economic nightmare that the rest of the world had been enduring. Consequently, Lalou's management skills were put to the ultimate test, as one by one Champagne markets collapsed around the globe. This was a time when all the big houses today had built up their viticultural holdings, as the least successful houses went bust, only to be bought up by the survivors. It was under these conditions that Lalou proved his worth, almost doubling Mumm's vineyards to 96ha (237 acres), virtually all in grands crus, and in 1939 he was made chairman of the company, a post he held until he passed away in 1973. After World War II, Lalou continued to acquire vineyards by taking over other Champagne houses, including Perrier Jouët (the only firm to which he gave any autonomy) in 1959, G Chauvet Frères in 1969, and Heidsieck & Co Monopole in 1972.

Once asked to explain why his micromanagement of Mumm's vineyards was in such contrast to his almost hands-off approach to day-to-day management, he responded: "The head of a major business must keep his distance from all matters of detail except the crux of the matter, and the crux of the matter for Champagne is the soil." Lalou was rightly a legend in his own lifetime, but

above all else he was a modest man. So how and why, you might wonder, could such a modest man name a Champagne after himself? The fact is that he didn't; his managing director Marzio Snozzi did. When the first vintage was due to be launched, and Snozzi told Lalou that they were naming this cuvée in his honor, the great man dryly jibed: "I didn't realize that we have such a lack of imagination at Mumm these days."

Cuvée R Lalou

The years produced so far are 1996, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2002, and 2006. Over the past five years I have had vertical tastings of these wines at various stages of their development on yeast and off. I have also tasted their *vins clairs* on a *lieu-dit-by-lieu-dit* basis. Although the 1996 was produced in a tiny, experimental volume, it was in the running to be released as the first vintage until Pernod Ricard's takeover of Allied Domecq in 2005. Pernod Ricard is certainly continuing with the same long-term view and quality-driven strategy for Mumm that Allied Domecq established (Pernod Ricard's five-year plan to build new production facilities represents the largest investment since the excavation of Mumm's cellars in 1853), but the takeover process and the integration procedures that followed delayed the launch by at least two years.

Launching a new Champagne cuvée with a nine-year-old vintage (as the 1996 would have been in 2005) shows a commitment to quality, but launching it with an 11-year-old vintage just seems odd. Furthermore, it was never in the same class as the straight 1996 Mumm Cordon Rouge, which just keeps getting better. At the National Wine Show in Canberra, Australia, in 2001, James Halliday told me: "Having recently tasted the 1996 Mumm Cordon Rouge, I understand why you have been singing its praises so loudly." It was on stunning form at the 2007 Annual Champagne Tasting in London, so I'm still singing its praises, but the 1996 precursor to Cuvée R Lalou is tiring, and Mumm could not release a prestige cuvée that was both inferior to the straight vintage cuvée of the same year and past its best, so it was put down to experience, and declassified. Following are my latest notes on each vintage of Cuvée R Lalou.

1996

Five *lieux-dits*: Les Briquettes (Avize), Les Bionnes (Avize), Les Hannepées (Bouzy), Les Houles (Verzy), Valnon (Aÿ).

Too evolved, not the best 1996. (Mumm has since declassified.)

1998

Eight *lieux-dits*: Les Crupots (Ambonnay), Les Briquettes, Les Bionnes, Les Maladries (Avize), La Croix de Cramant (Cramant), Les Hannepées (Bouzy), Les Rochelles (Verzenay), Les Houles (Verzy).

The first vintage of Cuvée R Lalou. Complete and harmonious on the palate, with a slowly unfolding mousse of tiny bubbles, and floral notes including acacia on the nose. Black grapes dominate the front and middle palate, with citrus fruits shifting into walnut complexity toward the finish, and minerality on the aftertaste. Long, linear, and intense rather than rich. Already has finesse, but needs time to show its true potential. Drink 2007–18.

1999

Eight *lieux-dits*: as for 1998.

Doesn't have the finesse of the 1998, but the mousse is now excellent, giving it more finesse than in 2006, when I thought it should be declassified. Wait and see. (Mumm will probably release.)

2000

Eight *lieux-dits*: as for 1998.

Too dark. Good fruit, but you cannot release a Champagne of this age and color. Declassify. (Mumm has declassified.)

2002

Eight *lieux-dits*: as for 1998.

Fabulous potential; probably better than the 1998. (Mumm will declare this vintage.)

2006

All 12 *lieux-dits*

Tasted as *vins clairs* only. Some excellent *lieu-dit* components: Les Perthes in Cramant (intense, citrus, mineral); Les Briquettes in Avize (perfumed, rich, creamy, lovely acids); Les Rochelles in Verzy (more finesse than the Verzy used in the straight vintage); Les Crupots in Ambonnay (classic red-fruit component).

Special, not bling

For Mumm, Cuvée R Lalou is not a "bling" prestige cuvée that is destined to be consumed without care in a nightclub or flaunted in a celebrity restaurant where status is more important than cuisine. For me, it is more wine than Champagne—and it is a gastronomic wine, which is very much in the tradition of the original Cuvée René Lalou. With this classic new cuvée, I truly believe Mumm has found its soul again, but Cuvée R Lalou will appeal not only to those who loved Mumm's original prestige cuvée; it will also attract a following among serious new consumers. It is a different Champagne: not lighter than the original Cuvée René Lalou, but more linear, more terroir-driven, and, dare I suggest, it could even have the potential for more finesse, if Mariotti continues to improve year on year. Above all else, it is a wine for those who believe that Champagne has a place at the table. These cognoscenti will want to age it, to soften the mousse and to encourage the development of those wonderful, mellowing bottle aromas that bring such seductive complexity to mature Champagne.

As each vintage of Cuvée R Lalou evolves in bottle, its most ardent followers will want to match it at every stage to specific dishes. In 2007, for example, the 1998 Cuvée R Lalou is the perfect partner to the second of Arnaud Lallement's trio of dishes featuring green asparagus from Robert Blanc in Vaucluse. I do not mean to suggest anything as pretentious as this specific vintage of that particular cuvée goes only with Monsieur Blanc's asparagus, but his asparagus is perhaps the greatest in all France, and I think that the source of such exceptional ingredients deserves the same billing as the chef who prepares them with such skill. The second of the trio of dishes consisted of just one short, fat spear of Vaucluse asparagus on the crunchy side of al dente served on a bed of what Lallement describes as black-truffle purée, but which was granular with nothing liquid or even moist binding the grains. It is possibly the simplest dish I have ever had from a two-star Michelin chef, and it was perfect with the 1998 Cuvée R Lalou. I can imagine this wine in ten years' time going with the third dish (a Marmite pot containing tiny cuts of asparagus in a very light but extremely rich carbonara "broth"), but at no stage in its life could it accompany the first of the three dishes (wafer-thin lengthways slithers of raw asparagus, arugula leaves, and Parmesan shavings tossed in a minuscule amount of aged balsamic), which would have been ideal with a freshly disgorged Pol Roger Blanc de Blancs. But I could hardly suggest that to the chairman and CEO of Martell Mumm Perrier Jouët. ■