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Champagne Selsosse: The House that Jacques Built

by Tom Stevenson

Anselme Selsosse's ancestors have been growing grapes in Avize for centuries, but it was not until 1959 that his father, Jacques, became the first in the family to produce and sell his own Champagne. That first vintage yielded just 2,500 bottles because Jacques Selsosse hedged his bets by continuing to sell virtually all of his grapes. After obtaining a BTS degree in viticulture and enology at Beaune, Anselme Selsosse took over from his father, who was by then producing 12,000 bottles per year but was still selling the majority of the crop as grapes to Lanson. Anselme continued to make Champagne like his father, but confesses, "I did not consume my wines. Then in 1976, my third year of winemaking, I was confronted with a great drought. I said to myself that the grapes were so ripe, I must produce less foam—just a half-mousse. So I put in less sugar, and by doing this I realized I had changed my approach. I discovered freedom."

Since that epiphany, Anselme Selsosse has been revered as a Champagne visionary by some and deemed as mad as a hatter by others. He is definitely eccentric, undeniably charismatic, overtly opinionated, and not a little bit obsessed, with a tendency to philosophize à la Deiss over even the simplest question. I asked him how many hectares he owns, but could he

just say 7.5 hectares? Eventually he did, but not before he told me that no one owns a terroir, that he does not consider himself a proprietor, that there are two families (Chardonnay and Pinot Noir) living on his terroir, and that each vine is a live individual, like an inhabitant of a village. He showed me a drawing of one of his inhabitants, a vine with a very small canopy and very large root system, explaining that when these wee guys are respected, they grow strong roots and reward the farmer with high-quality ripe grapes. I took the drawing from him, turned it upside down, and pointed out that it was a good job they did not live on the wrong side of the tracks (east of the D20), otherwise they would look like this! He smiled, thinking no doubt that the huge canopy and tiny roots might represent a big bully with a shallow soul.

Selsosse's Chardonnay family is much the larger, with 650,000 individuals living in Avize (at 4ha, by far the largest community), Cramant, Oger, and Le Mesnil-sur-Oger; his Pinot Noir family has just 85,000 individuals residing in Aÿ, Ambonnay, and Mareuil for Pinot Noir. There are 47 *lieux-dits*, and they are all vinified separately. Yields are relatively low. Looking at the most recent high- and low-yielding vintages, Selsosse averaged 82.5hl/ha in 2004 (compared to the region-wide average of 138hl/ha) and 17.5hl/ha (compared to 49.5hl/ha). Often quoted as biodynamic, Anselme does lean toward biodynamism, but he refuses to be bound by any dogma. He uses Claude Bourguignon as his soil consultant and is an admirer of Fukuoka, not to mention Calvin, Cistercian monks, and science. Yep, science. He's not averse to it.

Anselme vinifies in 228-liter barriques, all aged six years or less but with no more than 20 percent new. First and second fermentations are with indigenous yeasts. The wines undergo *bâtonnage*, but never malolactic, and remain on fine lees for as long as 8–12 months before bottling. A low-sulfur regime is employed, reserve wines are kept in cask (using a solera system for Substance), disgorgement takes place at least six months prior to release,

with minimal residual sugar and again a minimal use of sulfur.

The average production is now 48,000 bottles, but recently purchased vineyards will take this figure up to 58,000 by 2011.

The range

I thought long and hard before accepting an invitation to review the current Selsosse range. My position on these wines is well documented and is summed up in my *Sotheby's Wine Encyclopedia* (2007): "Anselme Selsosse has found a niche in the market for classic, barrique-fermented, non-malolactic wines that receive minimal *dosage* and usually require several years' extra post-disgorgement cellaring to show their full potential. Generally far too much raw oak for my liking, but there is no denying the quality of the wine underneath."

It would be a nonsense not to include Selsosse in any book covering a large number of Champagne producers, and despite this less-than-glowing description, I gave Selsosse a two-star rating—on a par with Ruinart, for example. I did this because although I do not appreciate the style, I appreciate that others do. He is, for example, highly rated by Andrew Jefford, Richard Juhlin, and Peter Liem. He has been declared France's top winemaker by *Gault Millau* and is practically hero-worshipped by a small number of extremely knowledgeable consumers who are not just willing to pay £145 for a bottle of Substance but are absolutely delighted at the prospect. While I respect their opinion, I have not shared it. So why write an article about the wines, only to end up condemning them? That was my dilemma, but I accepted the challenge to put my own opinion through the severest of tests. It is not as if I base my opinion on ignorance. As I wrote in my 2003 *Champagne & Sparkling Wine Guide*, "I have been experimenting with the effect of post-disgorgement aging on all Selsosse cuvées for five years, and this was an exception [one that was "deliciously fresh and clean with intense, crisp fruit 12 months later"]. In most cases, the

raw, estery oak does not magically disappear, and in a number of instances the wines darken and oxidize quite rapidly." I try to keep up with what Anselme has on the market, and earlier this year I had done a one-to-one tasting with him at Fortnum & Mason in London, courtesy of its wine buyer, Tim French. But if I was going to take on this review, I intended to give Anselme's Champagnes even more opportunity to shine. I knew they would not perform well (for me) in a clinical

tasting environment, since the dominance of oxidative and oak aromas would shoot down the wines before they had a chance to fly. Consequently, I tasted the current range (with the exception of the forthcoming 1999, which was my favorite in our one-to-one tasting but not available for this test) with food. The idea was not to discern which dish goes with a particular cuvée, but to taste—and drink—the wines in the same environment as most Selosse loyalists enjoy them: at the table. After an extensive tasting session, I deliberately allowed the wines to warm up at the table, to discover the optimum drinking temperature. I then resealed the bottles and repeated the process one day later, and two days after that.

I was less impressed after putting these Champagnes through this exhaustive test than I was when I tasted them with Anselme at Fortnum & Mason. At the one-to-one with Anselme, I thought the same wines tasted richer and longer. I also believed that the oxidative character might be marginalized by the distraction of food at the table, but in fact it was heightened. Although there is no doubt in my mind about Anselme's passion, or the potential of his terroir, or indeed the quality of the grapes he produces every year, the wines do not live up to either his abilities or his terroir. They are too oxidative, too aldehydic, and too oaky, lacking in freshness, finesse, and vivacity.



Personally, I think that he overripens his grapes, resulting in wines that are somewhat ungainly, but Bollinger, another low-dosage, oxidative producer, has demonstrated with its Vieilles Vignes Françaises that a Champagne made oxidatively from overripe fruit does not have to lack finesse. It is, therefore, not the oxidative character per se but the degree of oxidativeness that is the problem, and I think the long barrel aging and low-sulfur regime are jointly the cause. If only Anselme kept his reserve wines in stainless steel, like Krug or Bollinger (only Bollinger's oldest reserves are kept under light pressure in magnums) and he increased the SO₂ after disgorgement (some producers use no sulfur until this point, so this does not necessarily threaten a low-sulfur regime). Selosse Champagnes are cult wines that could be sold many times over, so there is little chance that he will bother, but I would love to see him make just one non-aldehydic cuvée, because whatever resentment his loyal followers feel about my views, they are not going to turn their noses up at such a wine, and—who knows?—they might even like it!

Initiale Brut (Disgorged January 17, 2007)

The youngest and largest-volume wine in the range, this is a blanc de blancs from three villages (Avize, Cramant, and Oger) and three successive vintages (not revealed); Anselme describes it as "an accomplished and balanced individual." Obviously the freshest and youngest, but still very oxidative, with oak dominating fruit. A black-tea aroma developed after one hour and remained after

one day, when much of the oxidative character disappeared, but so did much of the fruit. *33,000 bottles a year.*

VO Version Originale Extra Brut (Disgorged October 9, 2006)

Another blanc de blancs blend of three villages (Avize, Cramant, and Oger) and three successive vintages (not revealed); Anselme describes this as "a distinguished, serious silhouette." A real Jekyll-and-Hyde Champagne, with strong, aldehydic-oaky aromas, aldehydic fruit of truly extra-brut proportions on the palate, and a raw-oak finish. This cuvée amazingly lost most of its aldehydic character after the bottle had warmed up on the table (though it was still fridge-cold). After an hour there were still some oxidative aromas but not aggressively aldehydic, and the fruit revealed rhubarb, coffee, and white-chocolate notes. One day later all oxidative aromas had dissipated, but the oakiness on the palate was emphasized. *3,600 bottles a year.*

Substance Brut (Disgorged August 2006)

A blanc de blancs monocru from Avize, produced from a solera of every vintage since and including 1986. Anselme describes this as "an anti-vintage, averaging out the climate of every year." All oak and oxidation, this cuvée did not change after one hour, one day, or three days! *3,000 bottles a year.*

Exquise Sec (Disgorged June 28, 2007)

A blanc de blancs with a relatively high dosage. Anselme describes this as "an expressive gourmand." Rich, long, and satisfying, it is not surprising that Anselme's highest-dosage cuvée is not oxidative, let alone aldehydic. He should ask himself why. *1,000 bottles a year.*

Contraste Brut (Disgorged February 2, 2005)

A pure Pinot Noir from La Côte Faron, a *lieu-dit* in Aÿ. Anselme describes this as "incredibly vinous and powerful." Oxidative-gamey aromas, with a richness of fruit on the palate and Amontillado notes. After one hour, and with just a bare chill on the wine, most of the oxidative aromas had disappeared and the finish had assumed a gentle hint of toastiness. After one day, there was no oxidative or oak character.

Rosé Brut (Disgorged 15 June 2007)

An Avize base colored by red wine purchased from Francis Egly of Ambonnay. Anselme describes this as "a well-built, muscular colossus." The oxidative-oakiness here is somewhat muted and disappears relatively quickly. Good, fresh acidity. This cuvée has the most finesse. *6,000 bottles a year.*