

WINES THAT ARE MOSTLY APPROACHABLE WITH ENJOYMENT NOW

# VINTAGE WARS

## 1997 v 1998 CHAMPAGNE

Michael Edwards introduces a tasting at which he was joined by Essi Avellan MW and Tom Stevenson, pitting two consecutive Vintage Champagne years against one another

Both these Champagne vintages could be called the dark horses of the 1990s; they are rather underrated when young by some Anglophone critics in thrall to such “greats” as 1995 and 1996. But returning to taste the '97/'98 duo, as the wines approach their peak, it isn't hard to find some very good, occasionally exceptional Champagnes—so often true in challenging years in the marginal climate of the Marne, when the best of the Champenois winemakers successfully deploy their special skills of selection.

The 1997 vintage looked like an impending disaster in the spring and early summer: destructive frost hail, *millerandage*, and other perils. Fortunately, July was hot, August balmy, and not a drop of rain fell on the September harvest. The result of that Indian summer was a charming, succulent vintage of excellent maturity (10.2% natural ABV). However, 1997 is conventionally regarded as a vintage for early drinking because of its modest levels of acidity. But the reader might consider two factors that perhaps explain why the best '97s still look in good shape today, at 13 years of age. The spring frost insured that '97 was the smallest crop since 1985 and one of the most concentrated, because of perfect ripeness and healthy pH ratios. The other factor worth remembering is that some of the most beguiling vintages in Champagne have been moderate rather than high in acidity—1959, 1982, 1989, and 2002. Few would ever claim that 1997 is in their class, but it is certainly a good year for Pinot-dominated Champagnes and, no surprise, for red, still Coteaux Champenois. The Chardonnays are more mixed, sometimes looser-framed; but top bijou producers in Le Mesnil—a grand cru that likes heat and seldom lacks acidity—have produced seductive '97s that are still holding well in 2010. Both Salon (not in our tasting) and Pierre Péters (which is) make delicious current drinking.



The 1998 vintage was also a challenge, but the difficulties throughout the mid- to late growing season were more intense, marked by outbreaks of disease in a roller-coaster year of veering weather extremes: May and June alternated between heat (up to 90°F [32°C]) and a freak frost from May 23. Rain at flowering was followed by heavier downpours in July, which encouraged oidium and botrytis. Then a blistering-hot August reduced the size of the crop but also sowed the seeds of greatness in the best grapes, with latent extract and complexity. Serious rainstorms returned in early September, but by the middle of the month the sun

came out and lasted through a warm and dry harvest. At the end of a nail-biting season, the figures eventually made encouraging reading: 9.8% average natural alcohol and very healthy but not excessive levels of total acidity (9.8g/l). On paper, this suggests a classic, mid-weight vintage for those who like a subtly brisk, mineral character in tune with a generous ripeness of fruit. Champagne specialist Terry Theise has written that he remembers some beautifully formed '98 Chardonnays when he first tasted them. These positive comments do, admittedly, paint a best-case scenario. And it is no secret that some great houses—Bollinger (apart from a tiny amount of Vieilles Vignes Françaises) and Jacquesson especially—did not make a Vintage wine, and nor was there a Cristal from Roederer. These dissenters worried variously about the sanitary state of some vineyards, instability in certain wines, and their perceived tendency to premature oxidation. Other equally famous maisons and vigneron relished the challenge and have created some fine, racy '98s, notable for their purity, balance, and breeding. Fleetness of foot is their major attraction.

Yet one cannot shirk the issue of their future development. Playing devil's advocate, certain cuvées,

especially those that are Chardonnay-led, are starting to show an oxidative evolution that may make for generous, point-winning flavors in mid-2010; but this development also raises a question mark over the wines' longevity. It is telling that the much-praised Piper-Heidsieck Rare 1998 is

class. The pure Chardonnay '97s are voluptuous, but I thought Larmandier-Bernier Vieille Vigne de Cramant and Pommery Cuvée Louise showed more finesse than many.

The 1998s were a seesaw experience this time, up and down in a mercurial year that had some fine racy wines but

Returning to taste the '97/'98 duo, as the wines approach their peak, it isn't hard to find some very good, occasionally exceptional Champagnes—so often true in challenging years, when the best of the Champenois winemakers successfully deploy their special skills of selection

always shown at tastings in magnums, which suggests it may be a frailer wine in bottle. My own view—a very personal one—is to drink most '98s now and over the next year or two. There are, of course, some splendid exceptions that could live much longer: The non-malo Vintage cuvées of Alfred Gratien and Lanson are vigorous delights; the ultimate reductive style of '98 Dom Pérignon stands out repeatedly at tastings; as does the Blanc de Chardonnay of Pol Roger, made, as it is, prior to fermentation, by the cold-settling technique of separating out and eliminating the coarser lees that harbor oxidative elements. This is not to say that barrel-fermented, oxidatively styled wines are not as successful. Krug Clos du Mesnil '98 could turn out to be a great, athletic wine—better in my view than the '96—but it didn't show anything like its full potential in the tasting and was overshadowed by the Krug Vintage '98 *assemblage*.

In essence, the best '98s required sorting of the finest rot-free grapes—not as common a practice in Champagne as it should be—and winemaking that combined intuition and protective enological techniques. Challenging conditions often encourage human ingenuity and make for more interesting wines. So, we end where we began: Selection is everything.

As for my own conclusions from the tasting, I was pleasantly surprised by how well the '97 vintage showed—a lesson to us all that high levels of acidity are not always the prerequisite of long life in Champagne. The size of the crop, small and concentrated, enhanced by perfect maturity, good extract, and good levels of natural alcohol, have made this generous vintage last much longer than anyone predicted at the outset. I think 1997 is preeminently a Pinot-led year, perfectly expressed in the exquisite Billecart-Salmon Nicolas François Billecart—a Champagne now at its peak but likely to remain on the mountaintop for some time. I also loved the Jacquesson 1997 Vintage: strong, ripe, of fine oak/fruit integration, and reflective of the top-notch origins of this bijou house's vineyards at Aÿ, Dizy, and Avize. Bollinger Grande Année '97 showed itself yet again to be one of the better Bollinger vintages of the '90s, always with more depth and vigor than the RD version of the same year; the latter was putting on flesh today but was not in the same

also some disappointments—not helped by faulty bottles and certain wines sulking in advancing-maturation blues. I don't know whether heat in transit during torrid July had temporarily thrown them off balance or, more likely, whether quite a few were showing premature oxidation. On this, I agree very much with Essi Avellan: I also wonder how long many will last. But don't despair, because there were also some great bottles that could make old bones: Veuve Clicquot Grande Dame and Joseph Perrier Josephine, to name another two, even if both wines were not at their very best here. The fine Maily Grand Cru, by contrast, showed very well, as it almost always does. My visceral reaction to this tasting of '98s is not to make categorical judgments based on this one experience, a passing snapshot in a wine's lifetime. But the vintage clearly needs to be watched closely. Something is going on.

### Average and range of scores

	Average	Range
Essi Avellan MW	16	12–19
Michael Edwards	16.5	14.5–18
Tom Stevenson	16	11–19
All wines	16	11–19

### Michael Edwards's top wines

Billecart-Salmon Cuvée Nicolas François Billecart 1997 18
Jacquesson 1997 18
Krug 1998 17.5
Larmandier-Bernier Grand Cru Vieille Vigne de Cramant 1997 17.5
Bollinger La Grande Année 1997 17
Dom Pérignon 1998 17
Duval-Leroy 1998 17
Henriot 1998 17
Jacquesson Grand Cru Avize 1997 17
Lanson Gold Label 1998 17
Laurent-Perrier Alexandra 1998 17
Maily Cuvée Les Échansons 1997 17
Joseph Perrier Cuvée Josephine 1998 17
Pierre Peters Le Mesnil-sur-Oger Blanc de Blancs 1997 17
Pol Roger Blanc de Blancs 1998 17
Pommery Grand Cru 1998 17
Alain Thiénot La Vigne aux Gamins 1998 17

**Billecart-Salmon Cuvée Nicolas François Billecart 1997 – 18.5**

**EA:** Deep golden color. Rich, sweet, toasty nose of mocha and pastry shop. Developing soft palate with plenty of fruit but also freshness. Quite concentrated structure, and has good length. Fine mousse and silky, juicy texture. Drinking perfectly today and over the next 7–10 years. **18.5**

**ME:** Fine, luminous gold, slight tone of vigorous green; fine, classy nose, preserved freshness and golden maturity, discreetly autolytic; sprightly, proper tension sustains mature fruit, complexity, and vinosity. Exceptional. **18**

**TS:** Seductive, toasty-infused aromas, beautifully proportioned, precisely tuned acidity. This is one of those Champagnes you love to have in your cellar because it moves so slowly, yet every time you open a bottle, you notice subtle differences. **19**

**Lanson Gold Label 1998 – 18**

**EA:** Deep golden color. Nuanced fruity nose of French pastry, confectionery, vanilla, and ripe apple. Nicely energetic palate, with vibrant but fine mousse, juicy texture, and a long, fruity length. Appealing, but with a good degree of personality and depth. Drinking now but still on its way up for the next few years. **18**

**ME:** Lemon-yellow with gold glints; a nice autolytic, developed character on both nose and palate. Balance, harmony, and class. **17**

**TS:** Classy Champagne, light and youthful in taste, with a lovely light touch of slow-developing toastiness on the nose and finish. Great acids. **18.5**

**Piper Heidsieck Rare 1998 (magnum) – 18**

**EA:** Medium-deep lemon-yellow color. Charming, fine-tuned nose, with sweet fruit backed up by rich, toasty notes. Gunflint and coffee notes. Smooth and silky on the long palate. The same aromatics continue on the

intensely fruity but refreshing and focused palate. A good degree of both finesse and harmony. **18.5**

**ME:** Mid-yellow, inconspicuous hue; warm earth nose but develops vinosity with air; a vanilla, honeyed, even rancio aspect. A full and vinous palate, rich and very *goût anglais*. **16.5**

**TS:** Lovely, pale, youthful color. Classic toasty-mature Champagne; beautifully focused by very fine acidity. Absolutely stunning. Apart from the toastiness, this is an extraordinarily youthful Champagne, full of citrus, vanilla, brioche, and very bright fruit, with a very obvious capacity for the development of even greater complexity. **19**

**Bollinger La Grande Année 1997 – 17.5**

**EA:** Deep golden color. Pronounced, overt, and noticeably oxidative nose of bruised apple, spice, earth, toast, and honey. Lots of layers and signs of sweet oak. Powerful palate, with the same nuances as on the nose. Juicy, muscular texture and palate, with plenty of intensity and depth. Long-lasting and fresh finish. Starting to drink well, but there is potential for the next 5–10 years due to the intensity and spine. **17.5**

**ME:** Mid-yellow gold, ripe yet fresh aromas; well-integrated acidity sustains gently evolved secondary flavors of honey and vanilla and other signs of vinosity. Still has freshness and tension. **17**

**TS:** Great concentration, lovely acids, very fresh yet complex, with slowly evolving citrus and stone fruits. A lot of gravitas. **18.5**

**Alfred Gratien 1998 – 17.5**

**EA:** Deep lemon color. Refined, clean nose of lemon and white flowers alongside dominant tart apple character. Restrained, focused, and highly acidic palate is vivacious, with a good degree of tension. Medium-bodied with some elegance, medium intensity, and long length. Good but not great, due to tartness, tightness, and lack of expression. Will improve for the next five years, but there are no building blocks for extended aging. **17**

**ME:** Green-flecked yellow; sweetly ripe fruits are the main impression on the nose; harmonious balance of evolved fruitiness and acidity, still with some tension. **16**

**TS:** A fabulous combination of unbelievably fresh, youthful, undeveloped Champagne, yet beautifully smooth with huge potential.

Impressive. Great acids. Complexity comes out in the glass. **19**

**Krug 1998 – 17.5**

**EA:** Deep golden color. Soft and fruity red-fruit-and-toast nose; coffee and yeasty notes. Signs of moderate deliberate oxidation. Medium-bodied; structured palate, with plenty of ripe fruit. Good depth of flavor and a nicely harmonious overall balance. **16.5**

**ME:** Gold tints but still youthful: fine nose of aging Champagne, fresh, mineral, mature but dancing; fine confirming golden fruitiness and a mineral elegance. Tastes like an excellent '98? **17.5**

**TS:** Exquisitely rich, oak-fermented Champagne. Absolutely true brut. A baby. Keep forever! **19**

**Laurent-Perrier Alexandra 1998 – 17.5**

**EA:** Deep onion-skin color. Elegant, toasty nose of red cherry, confectionery, leather, and floral notes. Fascinating nose, with lots of layers. Quite youthful on the mineral palate, with lovely acidic spine and elegant lightness of overall impression. Fine mousse and very mild tannic presence. Drinking finely but still has a long way to go due to the underlying fruit intensity and backbone. Elegant, balanced, and with plenty of character. **19**

**ME:** Russet tones to this rosé, more winey than many Champenois styles. There's a certain bonbon fruitiness, checked by good acidity to stop it tasting cloying. A good positive mouthfeel, little red fruits and a big palate presence that demands food—very good with charcuterie, terrines, and cold cuts of game. **17**

**TS:** A lovely peach-cum-pale-salmon color that does not give away its 12–13 years of age. Can you imagine how a Non-Vintage rosé of that age would look? Orange! Quite often you need a black glass to taste a rosé objectively (often it's no different than a straight brut), since the color influences our descriptors, often of red fruits. But this Champagne has developed not so much in a fruit-driven but in a vinous-fruit-driven way. There are red fruits, but citrus, too, and cream. Really quite yummy! **16.5**

**Pol Roger Blanc de Blancs 1998 – 17.5**

**EA:** Deep golden color. Intense, soft nose of yellow apple, brioche, and toast. Ripe overt fruit and signs of moderate oxidation.

Pronounced fruity palate, with a muscular structure and good freshness. Long and juicy on the finish. This has still a long way to go. **17**

**ME:** Lemon-yellow; citrus and mineral-toned aromas, nicely developed; the palate confirms the purity of fruit, still vital yet gently evolving. This Champagne will hold well for some years. **17**

**TS:** Rich, succulent, creamy fruit. Very hedonistic, yet absolutely classic and has class. **18.5**

**Dom Pérignon 1998 – 17**

**EA:** Deep lemon-gold color. Soft, somewhat muted nose of flowers, bread, and apple. Round and ripe on the rich palate, which does not have much spine but more muscle. Good concentration and energy. Very good but not outstanding. Will drink well from now until 2020. **17.5**

**ME:** Lemon gold; sweet, ripe fruit, perhaps a moderate *dosage* detectable on the nose; better on the palate: generous fruit, elegant acidity, without being a blockbuster. **17**

**TS:** A Chablisienne minerality, very fresh and young. Not great classic Champagne but Champagne that makes a statement. **17**

**Jacquesson 1997 – 17**

**EA:** Deep golden color. Soft, overt, red-fruit nose, spice and French bakery. Full and round, balanced with enough but non-accentuated acidity. Long, intense palate, showing maturation but not tiring. Drinking well over the next 4–5 years. **17**

**ME:** Green-gold, expressive color, its depth possibly due to fermentation in oak. Lovely fruit-and-oak integration on both nose and palate, strong and fine, beautifully balanced. A connoisseur's Champagne. A 1998? **18**

**TS:** More vinous; less finesse. **15.5**

**Jacquesson Grand Cru Avize 1997 – 17**

**EA:** Deep golden color. Overt, round, soft nose of toffee, brioche, honey, and spice. Voluptuous on the palate, with enough freshness to support the weight. Well made, clean, and muscular. Ready to drink, but there is enough fruit for a further five years of maturation. **17**

**ME:** Lovely expression of the same house style but in a minor key. **17**

**TS:** Beautifully perfumed, fresh, chewy fruit finish. An absolutely pristine bottle? **NS**

**Mumm Cuvée R Lalou 1998 – 17**

**EA:** Deep lemony color. Elegant, youthful nose, with acacia, elderflower, yeast, and pastry notes. Fresh and lively on the palate, too. Marked acidity lifts the medium-intense palate to appear lighter than it is. Linear and elegant, with some complexity. Highly youthful, with no signs of tiring. **18**

**ME:** Bright, mid-yellow; tight, still citric nose; invigorating but not aggressive mousse on the tongue; fresh, straight, clean attack—very good as Champagne rather than wine. **16**

**ESSI AVELLAN'S VERDICT**

Surprise was my first reaction when I saw the list of the wines after the tasting. Based on my impressions and points, I thought we were generally tasting “regular” Vintage-level Champagne. In reality, the focus was on prestige cuvées, so my next feeling was disappointment.

For 1997, my expectations were not very high, and the wines delivered the openness, easiness, and drinkability that I was anticipating. In general, they were quite simplistic and ready to drink. Most of the time, when we had both vintages of the same wine, I preferred the 1998. There was one outstanding 1997, though: the Billecart-Salmon Cuvée Nicolas François Billecart.

The 1998s are puzzling me with their variability. There were some very fine wines, such as the Laurent-Perrier Alexandra Rosé and Piper-Heidsieck Rare. They were fresh, youthful, and highly elegant. However, too many were

showing overripe fruit and a highly mature character. On a positive note, they are drinking well now. But most of them I would not keep for very long.

One thing that struck me in my own assessments was how poorly the single-vineyard Champagnes did, and this includes every one of them. Thiénot La Vigne aux Gamins 1998 and Drappier Grande Sèndrée 1998 were way down on my list. Krug Clos du Mesnil 1998 and Billecart-Salmon Clos St-Hilaire 1998 appeared one-dimensional, but I failed to spot even the potential that both these wines should have. Clos des Goisses is always a difficult wine to taste blind in its youth. The personality of the wine was obvious, but without knowing what it was, I considered the wine to be too accentuated in acidity. When I tasted both 1997 and 1998 at Philipponnat just a couple of weeks earlier, I gave them, and especially the 1998, much higher marks.

**Top wines**

Laurent-Perrier Alexandra 1998 19  
Billecart-Salmon Cuvée Nicolas François Billecart 1997 18.5  
Piper Heidsieck Rare (En Magnum) 1998 18.5  
Lanson Gold Label 1998 18  
Moët et Chandon 1998 18

Mumm Cuvée R Lalou 1998 18  
Perrier-Jouët Grand Brut 1998 18  
Pommery Cuvée Louise 1998 18  
Pommery Grand Cru 1998 18  
Bollinger La Grande Année 1997 17.5  
Dom Pérignon 1998 17.5  
Tarlant Brut Prestige 1997 17.5

**TS:** Rich and creamy, but rather angular acids make a Champagne that is simply too young to drink now. Non-malolactic? Will be a gem in 10 or 20 years. **17.5**

**Joseph Perrier Cuvée Josephine 1998 – 17**

**EA:** Deep golden color. Overt nose, with some notes of oxidation. Bruised apple, dust, fudge, and apple juice. Full and round on the straightforward, somewhat austere palate. Fresh and vibrant but lacks finesse and scope. **16**

**ME:** Lemon-yellow, gold lights. Tastes more Chardonnay-led but in a very well-balanced golden but fresh style. **17**

**TS:** Rich, clean, complex. Really impressive mid-term complexity. Will continue to improve. **18.5**

**Perrier-Jouët Belle Époque 1998 (magnum) – 17**

**EA:** Medium-deep lemon-green color. Delicate nose of yeast, melon, and white flowers. Lively and youthful on the palate, too, with medium intensity. Quite fragrant and ethereal; elegantly cool fruit. Good length but not much concentration or depth. At its best over the next 5–7 years. **17**

**ME:** This is more complex and developed

than [Perrier-Jouët Grand Brut 1998], certainly giving more flavor and interest today. **16.5**

**TS:** Fresher, crisper, and livelier than the other wine from this producer, and with far more obvious finesse. **17.5**

**Pommery Cuvée Louise 1998 – 17**

**EA:** Medium-deep lemon color. A fragrant and fresh nose of confectionery, acacia, toast, and melon. Elegant palate, with a fine balance of ethereal fruit and highlighted acidity. The intensity will allow a positive development for a further 5–7 years; however, the wine still drinks finely today. **18**

**ME:** The nose on the first bottle tastes tainted. The second bottle is brighter, but neither really holds my attention. **14.5**

**TS:** By far the lightest color of all three wines from this producer. In all truth, it looks no more aged than two or three years, let alone another decade on top! Nothing wrong with the nose or palate, but I am not impressed. Is it stripped? Subliminal TCA? A second bottle confirmed my suspicions; chalk and cheese! Not only is there more color (subliminal TCA can strip color, as well as fruit; albeit still a very youthful tint, but the fruit is much more expressive). Lovely

“Lovely, pale, youthful color. Classic toasty-mature Champagne. Absolutely stunning. An extraordinarily youthful Champagne, full of citrus, vanilla, brioche, and with a capacity for the development of even greater complexity”—Tom Stevenson on Piper-Heidsieck Rare 1998



mousse, softer and more fluffy. (Can TCA affect the mousse?) I should not be put off by the first “off” bottle. I should score this as the second bottle deserves. (Some Australian competitions have stopped second bottles because judges were too timid in their scores of the second, better wine, whereas they would not have flinched at scoring high had the “off” bottle been the second, unopened bottle.) **18**

**Billecart-Salmon Cuvée Nicolas François Billecart 1998 - 16.5**

**EA:** Deep golden color, with a peachy hue. Overt, round, red-fruit nose. Wax, honey, and apple, with brioche nuances. Fruity and ripe, with maturing characteristics. Lacks freshness and spine. Will not improve but will keep for the next 3–4 years. **15.5**  
**ME:** Another classy bottle but less concentrated, fine, and dashing than its stablemate. **16.5**

**TS:** Absolutely classic Vintage Champagne. Has richness, balance, a lovely mousse, and finesse. A beautiful Champagne. **18**

**Perrier-Jouët Grand Brut 1998 - 16.5**

**EA:** Deep lemon-yellow color. Soft, evolving, toffee, yogurt, and coffee-bean nose. Fine and lacy-textured, with good tension and freshness and medium intensity. Fresh and charming to drink now, with an aging capacity for the next 7–10 years. **18**  
**ME:** This has a full fruit expression, but the marked acidity suggests part was fermented without malolactic. Maybe it needs to be aged further. **15.5**  
**TS:** Nice, but no immediate finesse. **16**

**Pol Roger Vintage 1998 - 16.5**

**EA:** Deep golden color. Yeasty nose, with oxidative bruised-apple notes, honey, and a spicy touch. Powerful mid-weight palate, with an accentuated acidity and a medium-length. Tart red fruit and toast on the palate. The parts are not fully integrated, and the wine lacks some finesse. **16**  
**ME:** Deeper, more evolved color than [Pol Roger Blanc de Blancs]; loosely knit fruit; near full maturity. **16**  
**TS:** The best mousse of the tasting so far: very soft, tiny bubbles, yet persistent in the mouth. What a lovely, lively, mature Champagne this is. **18**

**Beaumont des Crayères Nostalgie 1998 - 16**

**EA:** Deep golden color, with red hues. Soft and gentle nose of apple cider, vanilla, and pastry. Full and voluptuous on the smooth-textured palate. Gentle, round palate, with good depth but no true elegance or complexity. Ready to drink and will not improve distinctly. **15.5**  
**ME:** Certainly a more Pinot-based golden hue, flowing but quite large bubbles; yellow orchard fruits, a touch of camphor; broad and fleshy palate, lacks a bit of verve and

dash, but full, rounded flavors. **15.5**

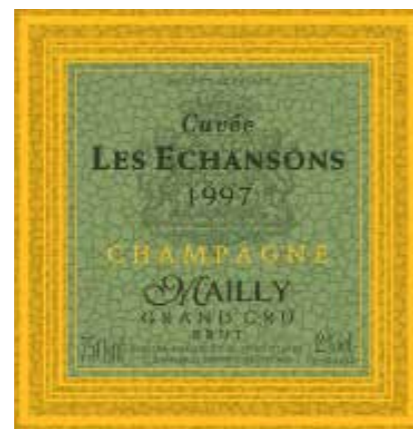
**TS:** Lovely, crisp acidity, mouthwateringly dry, with a hint of butterscotch complexity on the finish. **16.5**

**Billecart-Salmon Clos St-Hilaire 1998 - 16**

**EA:** Deep peach color. Straightforward and fruity nose, with apple pie, red fruit, and wax. Very tart palate, with accentuated acidity and simplistic fruit, which is not completely tied to the structure of the wine. No great potential, due to the dominant acidity. **14**  
**ME:** More yellow-gold. Quite raw and aggressive mousse on first bottle. Second bottle is better and gentler. **16**  
**TS:** This one needs a couple of years in your own cellar. (Don't buy if you do not have any to settle down.) It's more a matter of mousse performance (softening and evening out) than anything. Scored for potential. **17.5**

**Krug Clos du Mesnil Blanc de Blancs 1998 - 16**

**EA:** Deep golden color. Yeasty nose of bread dough, apple jam, and wax. Apple cider and *flor* yeast-like flavors on the juicy and fruity, medium-bodied palate. Rather straightforward but fresh and easy-drinking Champagne for consumption today and in the next couple of years. **15**  
**ME:** Slightly deeper, full, mature taste, but not with the same tension, drive, and perfect balance of [Krug 1998]. **15.5**  
**TS:** A tad fatter than the other wine (we had no idea of either producer or vintage, just an indication that the two vintages were from the same producer) but still very classic and lean. Another baby! **18**



**Maily Cuvée Les Échansons 1997 - 16**

**EA:** Medium-deep lemony color. Austere nose with bright red fruit, smoke, and honey. Oxidative signs and impurities. Modest mid-weight palate, with adequate length. **12.5**  
**ME:** More maturity to color, more open and expressive nose, a touch of honey and vanilla; best of all on the palate—a fine balance of dynamic tension, well-preserved fruit profile, and discreet secondary wine-like flavors. **17**  
**TS:** Currently spoiled by sulfurous compounds in mid-phase of development.

Though not attractive now, these will become coffee-toasty with time, which, with the beautifully structured, multilayered fruit underneath and finesse on the finish, mean that this is a great Champagne but not tasted in one of its best windows of opportunity. **18.5**

**Moët et Chandon 1998 - 16**

**EA:** Deep lemon-gold color. Soft, evolving, round, and nuanced nose of sweet toffee, coffee, and brioche. Rich and overt on the palate, with a fine mousse and velvety texture. Chewy and concentrated. Full and expressive, showing development but no signs of tiring. Muscular, approachable, and impressive. Drinks from now to 2025. **18**  
**ME:** This does have a golden, sunny maturity about it. Ripe and generous, but it's not especially complex. **16**  
**TS:** A good Champagne, but not a great one. No discernible faults—not aging too rapidly, not oxidative—but still does not leap out. **14.5**

**Pommery Grand Cru 1998 - 16**

**EA:** Pale lemon color. A fragrant and floral nose, with significant autolytic toast; sweet and charming. Fine and elegant on the palate, too, with a lightness of body and delicacy of flavors. Elegant, fluffy mousse and juicy texture, with a fine length and focus. Enjoyable today, and while it does not have the intensity for extended aging, it will hold nicely for the next 5–7 years. **18**  
**ME:** Straight yellow; poised, citrusy character—fruity but with vinous complexity. An excellent effort. **17**  
**TS:** Smooth, apples, but a bit pippy. **13**



**Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs 1998 - 16**

**EA:** Pale lemon-green color. Attractively sweet and toasty nose, with white flowers, confectionery, and pastry aromas. Fino Sherry-like yeasty notes on the delicate and fresh palate. The nose had more charm than the palate, which remains a bit diluted and singular. **16.5**  
**ME:** Quite light color; seems rather sweet on both nose and palate: a highish *dosage*. **15**  
**TS:** Very light color for a 12- or 13-year-old Champagne, a lovely point of acidity

“Medium-deep lemony color. Round and ripe. Straightforward but clean. A medium-bodied and energetic palate, with just enough fruit to support the high acidity. Elegant and fresh, remaining very youthful still”—Essi Avellan MW on Tarlant Brut Prestige 1997

accentuating the citrus notes; fairly recently dosaged, but will develop very well. **17**

**Tarlant Brut Prestige 1997 - 16**

**EA:** Medium-deep lemony color. Round and ripe, maturing red-apple-and-soft-pepper nose. Straightforward but clean. A medium-bodied and energetic palate, with just enough fruit to support the high acidity. Elegant and fresh, remaining very youthful still. **17.5**  
**ME:** More advanced, riper, and looser-framed than some; generous and ready now. **16**  
**TS:** Very good acids, but not as dominant as the other vintage, with less structure. **15**

**Tarlant Brut Prestige 1998 - 16**

**EA:** Medium-deep lemony color. Delicate nose of flowers, toffee, and cream. Piercingly acidic palate, with not enough fruity richness to back it up. Vibrant and medium-bodied, but too tart. **15**  
**ME:** Lemon-gold; fine, citrus-led green Chardonnay fruit, ripe but sprightly. Good definition and core on the mid-palate. Decent length. **16**  
**TS:** Recent disgorgement. Very high acids; needs time on second cork to mellow. Capable of impressive complexity. **16.5**



**Veuve Clicquot La Grande Dame 1998 - 16**

**EA:** Deep lemony color. Gentle and slightly muted nose of yeast, vanilla, and yellow apple. Some dusty notes on the straightforward and fresh palate, without great depth or complexity. Evolving with a capacity for five more years; however, there is not enough finesse or intensity to lift this to anything great. **15.5**  
**ME:** This is a well-made wine of clear citrus-led fruits, lent more interest by a pure, mineral edge. And it is still fresh. **16**  
**TS:** A lovely, fresh, mature, elegant Champagne. Will go coffee-like. **16.5**

**Bollinger RD 1997 - 15.5**

**EA:** Deep golden color, with orange hues. Strong bruised apple character of oxidative handling. Earthy notes, tobacco, and dust. Powerful but not fully clean. Round and fat but somewhat heavy, due to a lack of refreshing spine. **14.5**  
**ME:** More evolved and oxidative than [Bollinger La Grande Année 1997]. *À point*. Drink up. **16**  
**TS:** Fresher than [Bollinger La Grande Année 1997], but it does not have the concentration or class. **16**

**Dom Ruinart 1998 - 15.5**

**EA:** Deep lemon-gold color. Tight nose of yeast, toast, wax, and floral fruit. Inexpressive but finely mineral on the palate. A sensation of unripe fruit, with some phenolic touches. A good degree of elegance and some complexity. Youthful still, and it will improve for more than five years. **17**  
**ME:** A lime-and-lemon character on both nose and palate; maybe a little rustic, but it does not lack flavor or character. **15.5**  
**TS:** Angular, with a touch of high-toned aroma on the finish. **14**

**Deutz Cuvée William Deutz 1998 - 15.5**

**EA:** Deep yellow color. Smooth toffee and vanilla nose, with red-apple, honey, and lactic nuances. A fruity and round palate with signs of evolution. Fresh in acidity, with fair fruit intensity but not much complexity. Will not improve but can be kept. **15**  
**ME:** Lemon yellow. Briskly assertive and mineral; a healthy, positive Champagne, but today rather reductive, lacking generosity and expression. **15**  
**TS:** Has richness but also a country-rustic character. Needs food, but not fine food—a late-night supper, perhaps. **16**

**Duval-Leroy 1998 - 15.5**

**EA:** Medium-deep lemon-green color. Evolving nose of flowers, brioche, and lactic nuances. A sharp palate, where an overall harmony is still missing. Good intensity but no true finesse. **15.5**  
**ME:** This Champagne has a very natural feel to it; moderate *dosage*, finely mineral yet ripe and harmonious. Excellent. **17**  
**TS:** A touch oxidative on the nose, but it has substance. **14**

**Henriot 1998 - 15.5**

**EA:** Deep golden color. Evolving nose of soft

coffee notes, as well as spice and brioche; non-assertive and round. Fruity palate, with pastry notes and a good degree of vivacity. Fresh, medium-long, and drinking well now, but no great keeping potential. **17**  
**ME:** Green tinge to a mainly ripe golden hue; integrated, still vital acidity on the nose leads on to a fine, leafy, yet ripe mouthfeel. Fine-drawn and refined. **17**  
**TS:** A touch rustic. **12**



**Maily Cuvée Les Échansons 1998 - 15.5**

**EA:** Medium-deep peach-hued color. Forward nose, with simple red-fruit notes, with patisserie, apple cider, and honey. Not much depth or finesse. Coarse mousse on the mid-weight palate, which lacks spine and refinement. **13.5**  
**ME:** Mid-yellow and a regular cordon of bubbles; a quiet nose of yellow fruits and light spices; still fresh impact of mousse on the tongue; light-framed, with a pleasing tension, purity, and raciness, though fairly straightforward. **15.5**  
**TS:** Excellent, very high acids, with a true brut dryness that works, and a certain chewiness to the fruit (stone fruit, apricot, plums), with the perception, if not the actuality, of tannin on the finish. **17.5**

**Pierre Péters Le Mesnil-sur-Oger Blanc de Blancs 1997 - 15.5**

**EA:** Deep lemon-gold color. Pronounced, smoky, toasty nose, with sweet tropical notes, vanilla, coffee, and floral finesse. Fluffy, loose, but gentle mousse on the medium-bodied, refreshing palate. The nose has more charm than the palate, which is accentuated by woody toast notes. Juicy texture and long, pleasant finish. **16**  
**ME:** Mid yellow-gold: low-key but classy,



## TOM STEVENSON'S VERDICT

When the grapes for these two vintages were harvested, 1997 had the slight edge on paper. In the glass, though, it was always the 1998 *vins clairs* that showed best, so it was no surprise that far more 1998s were declared than 1997s. That said, it has also become evident that the smaller number of very best 1997s have always been equal in quality to the larger number of very best 1998s. It should be remembered that neither year was considered a standout at the time of harvest. However, the extra dimension of quality and concentration associated with a Vintage Champagne is more often the result of the stricter selection applied than it is of the intrinsic superiority of the year in question. The less outstanding the year, the more diligent selection must be, and so perhaps the conundrum exists that great Champagne vintages are not always from the best years. No one, for example, could have predicted how great the 1971s or 1981s would be. So, what can we make of the 1998s and 1997s from this tasting? The number of Champagnes submitted reflects the number of Vintage Champagnes declared, with 36 1998s compared to just ten 1997s. And with a roughly proportionate three 1998s and one 1997 in my four equal-first positions, the tasting demonstrated (for me, at least) that the very best 1997s are, indeed, the equal of the very best 1998s.

Examining my own results, it is clear that when tasting blind the true class of the very best has won through in all the top-scoring wines (the 18 that scored 17.5 or more). The names tell the story, even for Champagne Maillay. This cooperative not only focuses exclusively on grand cru vineyards within its own village, but also underwent a sea-change in quality in the 1996 vintage. My high scores for the two following vintages of Cuvée Les Échansons would seem to indicate that this was not a phenomenon of the extraordinary 1996 vintage but a step up in winemaking expertise. Looking at the finer detail of the 18 highest-scoring wines, I am reminded of Eric Morecambe's immortal phrase, "All the right notes but

not necessarily in the right order." I'm very happy with how well all these wines performed, but knowing the development of the historic disgorgement (disgorged prior to original release) of these Champagnes, I might be tempted to tweak the order somewhat. It is evident that different disgorgement dates have not only complicated the order of the top-scoring wines but have also affected the scoring of the middle order of wines. It is not simply a mix of recent and historic disgorgements; it also includes some disgorgements that were semi-historic and others that were disgorged not so much recently as one to three years ago.

If the myriad disgorgement dates create too uneven a playing field to assess each Champagne definitively, it is obviously impossible to evaluate the relative merits of the two vintages in general. Even had the playing field been absolutely level, we should not be thinking of reevaluating the quality of either 1998 or 1997 at this stage in their development. Champagnes of 10–15 years of age notoriously go through an awkward adolescent phase, and several in this tasting suffered from that. Champagnes of this age start to collect aromas that make them seem old, not mature or complex. This is because they have yet to profit from the slower processes of building richness on the palate, unfolding aromas of true complexity, and, if the balance is right and the aging progresses smoothly, increasing finesse throughout. This is what happens to all Champagne vintages at some point or another. It is part of the price paid for opening up bottles of a mature, reductive wine and exposing it to the air during the disgorgement process—a form of delayed bottle sickness, if you like. First comes a modest peak a few years after disgorgement, followed by the dip as the Champagnes appear to age prematurely, only to climb slowly to a greater peak. We have recently seen so-called premature aging in the '96s and '90s, but we should no more write off those great vintages than we should question the '98s and '97s.

## Top wines

Billecart-Salmon Cuvée Nicolas  
François Billecart 1997 19  
Alfred Gratien 1998 19  
Krug 1998 19  
Piper-Heidsieck Rare (en magnum)  
1998 19  
Bollinger La Grande Année 1997 18.5  
Lanson Gold Label 1998 18.5  
Maillay Cuvée Les Échansons 1997 18.5

Joseph Perrier Cuvée Josephine 1998  
18.5  
Pol Roger Blanc de Blancs 1998 18.5  
Billecart-Salmon Cuvée Nicolas  
François Billecart 1998 18  
Krug Clos du Mesnil Blanc de Blancs  
1998 18  
Pol Roger Vintage 1998 18  
Pommery Cuvée Louise 1998 18

harmonious nose, spices; fine mouthfeel and texture, integration of gently evolving fruit, vinosity, and a mousse that caresses the palate. *Vin fin*. 17

**TS:** Some sulfur, indicating a fairly recent disgorgement, underneath which there is a strangely perfumed wine, not immediately Champagne, but with high acidity and good focus. A touch of bitterness on the finish indicates a kernel of undeveloped extract that will develop. 14

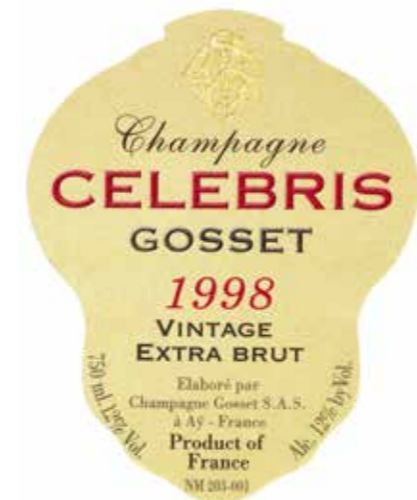


## Drappier Grande Soudrée 1998 - 15

**EA:** Deep, peachy yellow color. Pronounced nose, with noticeable oxidative characters. Apple jam, tobacco leaves, and cookies. Full-bodied, with phenolic bitterness. Fat, but lacks refreshment and spine. Long, drying, dusty finish. 13

**ME:** Evolving yellow/gold; rich, advancing bouquet, oxidative notes of honey, patisserie; very ripe dried fruits, and a plump mouthfeel, relieved by good acidity. Still a slight lack of tension and drive today. 16

**TS:** Noticeably deeper gold color than others in the first flight: a touch of marmalade color, suggesting an oxidative approach, possibly in barrel. Rich and fat, with a touch of sweetness, yet not without elegance. Not a wine that will easily do well in a blind tasting, but it will come into its own with food. I did not think I would be scoring this so high from the look of the wine. 16.5



## Gosset Célébris 1998 - 15

**EA:** Medium-deep color, with a peachy hue. Ripe and round, straightforward Pinot nose with red-fruit, bruised-apple, and gentle

spicy notes. Full and round on the palate, with a piercing acidity. Medium-long, with a drying finish. Simple and fruity but lacking finesse. 14

**ME:** Elegant yellow, gold lights, not forced; harmony of ripe fruit and acidity on nose; the mouthfeel shows brisk acidity and ripe, evolved fruit. 16

**TS:** Clean, crisp, nice dry finish, but apart from the autolytic complexity, it does seem somewhat straightforward for a 12- or 13-year-old Champagne. This could be a plus if it does develop more complexity. 15

## Larmandier-Bernier Grand Cru Vieille Vigne de Cramant 1997 - 15

**EA:** Deep golden color, with a pink hue. Powerful nose, with oxidative old oak characters of bruised apple and spicy wood. Red fruit backed up with honey. Mouth-filling, round palate, with some phenolic characters sticking out. Not very fruity on the palate but highly structured. Long, dry length. Lacks finesse and charm now but has good vinosity and power. 15.5

**ME:** Mid-gold, gold lights; mature, secondary aromas checked by still-fresh acidity; good, balanced mouthfeel, lightly honeyed and also freshly mineral. 17.5

**TS:** Slightly oxidative aromas of dry straw, very dry (too dry for some) and prone to premature aging (hence the oxidativeness). I suspect this was a good wine spoiled by too low a *dosage*. 12

## Philipponnat Clos des Goisses 1998 - 15

**EA:** Deep, clear golden color. Pungent and austere nose of apple, wax, and old-wood spiciness. Sharp and singular palate, with bright fruit on the finish. Straightforward and powerful but lacks some finesse and charm at this stage. 15

**ME:** More gold lights; freshness and maturity of scents in *vin fin* balance; a classy confirmation of the nose on the palate: harmonious. 16.5

**TS:** Very dry. Too dry. I love true brut dryness, but there has to be harmony, and here we have a puckering quality alien to Champagne as we have come to accept it. 14

## Pommery Cuvée Louise 1997 - 15

**EA:** Deep lemon color. Sweet toasty nose, with bright fruit, toast, and burned match. A delicate palate, with fine mousse and a medium intensity of fine-tuned fruit. Fresh,

vibrant, and drinking well now. 17

**ME:** The first bottle had an odd nose—some cork taint? The second bottle was slightly better and quite clean on the nose, with good linear fruit and definition. 15

**TS:** Some niggles about this wine; opinion is reserved, but I have scored the wine as is. (Two bottles, some TCA on both, more on the first bottle, especially since it was colder and should, therefore, have revealed less TCA.) 13

## Comte Audoin de Dampierre Cuvée Prestige 1998 - 14.5

**EA:** Deep lemon-yellow color. Rich, soft nose with pastry-shop and coffee-bean notes, as well as earthy nuances. Mouth-filling and round in texture, with more width than length. Straightforward red-fruit character and juicy, mouthwatering style. However, no great finesse or aging capacity. 16.5

**ME:** Lemon tint to yellow; quite lively scents of acidity; lemon confit overlay to the briskly mineral mouthfeel. Good, pure, and straightforward. 16

**TS:** A touch "goaty," by which I mean that there is a lingering, less-than-pure aroma that pervades the aftertaste. What this tells me is that this wine will break up earlier than others of the same vintage. 11

## Henri Giraud Aÿ Grand Cru Fût de Chêne 1998 - 14.5

**EA:** Deep orange-hued color. A powerful nose of ripe fruit, confectionery, and yeasty notes. An evolving, round palate, with plenty of fruit but lacking a refining spine. Heavy and mouth-filling. Could do with more finesse and complexity. 15

**ME:** Gold with bronze tints; oxidative nose of overripe apples in a hay loft; strong and fine on the palate. 16.5

**TS:** Bright gold color; a touch high-toned, a bit of floor polish, with the high tone returning on the finish. 12

## Philipponnat Clos des Goisses 1997 - 14.5

**EA:** Deep and peach-hued yellow color. Rich, honeyed nose, with cedarwood, red-apple, and baking-spice notes. The pungent, powerful, tart, red-fruit aroma is accentuated on the sharp and powerful palate. A chewy, structured palate is lacking. 14

**ME:** First bottle: color not completely clear and star-bright; very strange, unnatural nose; acidulous, impure palate. Imperfect bottle:

no score. The second bottle was completely different and much better: star-bright yellow gold, persistent mousse; a touch of menthol to the nose; a well-balanced, linear mouthfeel, clean, and focused. 16

**TS:** There is something very high-toned about this Champagne that I come across occasionally and have never been able to pin down. Being an anomaly, it has nothing to do with the house style, and I suspect that it is not a winemaking technique but is probably something to do with the harvest, resulting in an odd biochemical pathway to this end. Anyway, I don't like it! The second bottle of this wine is totally different, very brut dry, crisp, with absolutely no hint of anything high-toned. Perhaps these wines undergo second fermentation on cork rather than crown cap, which could suggest an environment that is not 100 percent surgically clean, possibly leading to the microbiological contamination of an odd bottle, which would make me rethink this high-tone anomaly. Scored on the second bottle. 14

## Orpale Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs 1998 - 14

**EA:** Deep lemon color. Pronounced, soft, and lactic nose of vanilla, fudge, and floral notes. Not fully clean, and with too much phenolic bitterness. 13

**ME:** Lemon-gold. Good maturity, with the drive of an active but not aggressive mousse; preserved flavors of crystallized fruit. Attractive and holding up. 16.5

**TS:** Tastes like an initially fine Champagne that shows the signs (goatiness!) of going over. 13

## Alain Thiénot La Vigne aux Gamins 1998 - 13.5

**EA:** Deep golden color. Overt nose of soft red fruit, vanilla, and sweaty characters. An unclean palate, with a round texture but no spine. 12

**ME:** Lemon yellow. Fine, evolved Chardonnay aroma: lemon confit. A very together mouthfeel; fine, vital fruit profile; a real core of flavor on the mid-palate. Generous but with admirable tension. 17

**TS:** Big, malolactic nose, all cream and butter, with a touch of "goat." 11

**Note:** The following wine was tasted but not scored due to cork taint: Pierre Gimonet Gastronome Premier Cru 1998.

"Mid-gold, gold lights; mature, secondary aromas checked by still-fresh acidity; good, balanced mouthfeel, lightly honeyed and also freshly mineral"—Michael Edwards on Larmandier-Bernier Grand Cru Vieille Vigne de Cramant 1997