

WINES THAT ARE MOSTLY APPROACHABLE WITH ENJOYMENT NOW

BLANC DE NOIRS

ALL BLACK—THE NEW WHITE

Tom Stevenson introduces the most comprehensive and revealing tasting of blanc de noirs since its international inception some 30 years ago. Essi Avellan MW and Simon Field MW agree that this generally misunderstood and undervalued style has finally come of age

Blanc de noirs is much younger than blanc de blancs and less frequently encountered, yet both styles have been produced for as long as small growers have made and sold their own Champagnes. Everyone knows that sales are cyclical in Champagne, going from boom to bust and back to boom again in fairly short cycles, but styles and the availability of grower Champagnes are cyclical, too.

Grower Champagnes used to be two a penny in the 19th century, but following the so-called Golden Era for Champagne at the turn of the 20th century, it became obvious that a relatively small number of famous brands could easily achieve such high prices that it was far more profitable for growers to sell grapes than wine. By the 1920s, when the French economy was booming, huge investments were made to increase the efficiency of Champagne production, and as part of the master plan, growers were encouraged to form collectives to insure a supply of grapes on an appropriate scale. Despite Prohibition, Champagne sales in America increased throughout the 1920s, thanks to the Mafia's bootleggers. In 1929, however, Wall Street collapsed, heralding the collapse of economies throughout the industrialized nations of the world. With little money about and no cause to celebrate, the demand for Champagne dried up—but the crops kept coming, and by 1933 the cellars of Reims and Epernay contained the equivalent of 33 years' worth of stock. The last thing Champagne needed was a large harvest, but that was exactly what it got in 1934. Most houses could not afford to buy any grapes, and many went bust, while a few took the opportunity to buy up vineyards at next to nothing. This is when the collectives were turned into cooperatives and started selling their own Champagnes in an attempt to reduce their annual losses



and keep vineyards under family ownership. This is also when most of the remaining few independent growers stopped selling their own Champagnes, and it would not be until the 1960s that they would start to make a comeback.

Though blanc de noirs and blanc de blancs were produced as long ago as the 19th century, these styles were not known by the general public because neither term was in common use, and the wines were sold simply as Champagne. They were not even made as a deliberate style but occurred purely through the happenstance of some growers who cultivated only one grape variety.

The first internationally recognized producer of blanc de blancs is generally thought to be Salon, in the 1920s, but Salon did not use the term on its label until the early 1980s, which was well after blanc de blancs Champagne came into vogue. I have yet to carry out definitive research, but the first use of blanc de blancs on a Champagne label I have seen is the Taittinger Blanc de Blancs 1943, which was made famous by Ian Fleming's *Casino Royale* (1953), the first of his James Bond novels. When James Bond considers ordering Taittinger 1945, the sommelier recommends Taittinger Blanc de Blancs 1943, which Bond approves, remarking that it is "probably the finest Champagne in the world." Exactly ten years later, Taittinger also featured in the second Bond film, *From Russia with Love*, though Fleming did not mention Taittinger at all in that book. By the time the author died in 1964, his 14 Bond novels had sold more than 40 million copies, and blanc de blancs Champagne was on the rise.

The true precursor to the modern trend for blanc de blancs was thus Bond, not Salon, and it was coincidentally another 007 favorite who would establish the reputation of blanc de noirs Champagne. Though the first blanc de

noirs I have come across was Champagne Palmer Blanc de Noirs Brut Intégral 1957 (see image overleaf), this small, high-class cooperative is virtually unknown today so could not have created the nigh-legendary reputation of blanc de noirs more than half a century ago. It took an extraordinary Champagne to carve out the myth that is now blanc de noirs, and the extraordinary Champagne in question was Bollinger Vieilles Vignes Françaises 1969.

The myth of the blanc de noirs style

Whenever blanc de noirs as a style is generally discussed, the terms commonly used are "big," "rich," "full-bodied," "weighty," "solid," "masculine," "chewy," "meaty," and so on. Yet most blancs de noirs are no different in size or richness than a traditionally blended Champagne, and some can

variety grown but how its grapes are grown and when they are harvested. The grapes are grown on ungrafted vines that are planted *en foule*, and the date of their harvest is a week later than it would normally be. Vieilles Vignes Françaises comes from three tiny *lieux-dits* totaling 52 ares, or just over half a hectare (1.29 acres): Clos St-Jacques in Aÿ-Champagne (a 15-are [0.37-acre] walled garden just across the road from Maison Bollinger village itself, all ungrafted but only 50 percent *en foule*); Chaudes Terres, also in Aÿ-Champagne (a 21-are [0.52-acre] walled plot in Bollinger's own back garden, entirely *en foule*), and Croix Rouge in Bouzy (a triangular 16-are [0.4-acre] patch of vines). Croix Rouge eventually succumbed to phylloxera in 2004, thus the 2002 Vieilles Vignes Françaises was the last vintage to be produced from all three plots, and later

Even if regionality was not often evident, there was a welcome diversity to these wines, with considerable differences in style, weight, and fruit spectrum. And hardly any of the wines exhibited the characteristics that some drinkers find so offputting: searing alcohol and raisined, pruney fruit

even be relatively light in weight. The reason for such a misconception is that, for a long while, the only Champagne with blanc de noirs on the label was Bollinger Vieilles Vignes Françaises, produced in minuscule volumes and sold at an extremely high price. Most regular Champagne drinkers—not to mention the vast majority of the international wine trade—learned about blanc de noirs through words written about this unique and most unusual wine, rather than by tasting it themselves.

No Champagne could possibly be compared to Vieilles Vignes Françaises, so the widely perceived style of blanc de noirs could not have been more ludicrously inappropriate. Yet even as other blancs de noirs began trickling on to the market, their purveyors and critics alike perpetuated the notion that all blancs de noirs are intrinsically full-bodied and masculine in style. We need only step back a bit to realize what nonsense this was. After all, what grape variety were they talking about? Pinot Noir, for goodness sake—the holy grail of grapes when it comes to silky elegance and finesse. The reason for the unique style of Bollinger's Vieilles Vignes Françaises is not so much the

vintages are entirely monocru from Aÿ-Champagne. The original three sites were capable of producing 8,500 bottles, but due to Bollinger's pruning regime and the disproportionate losses of processing separately such a small quantity of grapes, production averages 2,500 bottles and never exceeds 3,000. The grapes are grown on ungrafted vines by the *à l'avance* variant of *en foule*, the latter of which literally means "in a crowd," and this is descriptive of a congested carpet of new canes that advances each year by layering the vine forward. Because of this, Bollinger's *en foule* vineyards consist of some 30,000 bush-like canes per hectare, compared to fewer than 7,000 trained vines commonly found in a Champagne vineyard. Even when left unchecked, such ungrafted vines yield far fewer grapes than a grafted vine (but roughly the same yield per hectare, so while the overall volume is about the same, the juice will be more concentrated).

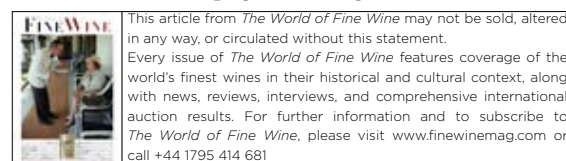
Tom Stevenson's top wines

Bollinger Vieilles Vignes Françaises Blanc de Noirs Brut 1998 20
Krug Clos d'Ambonnay 1998 20
Richard Cheurlin Carte d'Or Brut 19
Dosnon & Lepage Récolte Noir NV 19
Devaux Blanc de Noirs Brut NV 18.5
Fluteau Blanc de Noirs Brut 18.5
Jérôme Prévost La Closerie Les Béguines Extra Brut 18.5
Serge Mathieu Blanc de Noirs Brut NV 18
Pannier Brut Blanc de Noirs Cuvée Louis Eugène Brut 2006 18
Chartogne-Taillet Les Barres Parcel de Merfy Extra Brut NV 17.5
Jacquesson Vauzelle Terme Brut 2002 17.5
Benoît Lahaye Blanc de Noirs Prestige Brut NV 17.5

Average and range of scores

	Average	Range
Essi Avellan MW	15.5	10-19.5
Simon Field MW	16	9-18.5
Tom Stevenson	16.5	10.5-20
All wines	16	9-19.5

Original illustration by Charles Martin, *L'Art de Boire*, Etablissements Nicolas, Paris, 1920



Bollinger, however, takes the process a step further, pruning to restrict the number of bunches per vine to just two or three, reducing the potential yield by as much as 35 percent, making the juice even more concentrated. We know that ungrafted vines in pre-phylloxera times not only produced richer juice and thus more full-bodied Champagnes, but the date of harvest was much earlier because the smaller crop per vine promoted a quicker veraison. These three *lieux-dits* were not reconstructed *en foule* for Vieilles Vignes Françaises; they were historic remnants. Bollinger was therefore well aware that they ripen seven to ten days earlier than surrounding vineyards and well before the official declared harvest date. When blended into the Grande Année, there was no concern about these grapes being overripe. Indeed, they often proved to be a very useful building block at the time of *assemblage*. However, as soon as it was decided to produce just one cuvée from these three *lieux-dits*, the overripeness became an issue, and for several years Bollinger tried to get special dispensation to pick earlier. This was always refused, and a good thing, too, because if not for the bureaucrats, Vieilles Vignes Françaises would not be the unique and very special Champagne it is.

Some vintages of Vieilles Vignes Françaises are bigger than others, but in truth none deserves its “Beast of Bollinger” reputation, even though I was responsible for that designation. At its very best, Vieilles Vignes Françaises achieves unimaginable heights of elegance and finesse for a Champagne of such exceptional strength and concentration. It is this uniquely and impossibly contrasting character that sets it apart from all other blancs de noirs, and the awe attached to Vieilles Vignes Françaises probably frightened off potential imitators in the earlier years. A few more blancs de noirs emerged in the 1970s (such as Collety) and 1980s (Palmer and Bruno Paillard), but this style remained pretty much off the radar until the 1990s.



The blancs de noirs we tasted

All three tasters were well aware that a number of blancs de noirs can be so light that it is hard to imagine they do not contain at least some Chardonnay, and we all understood that blanc de noirs does not necessarily mean pure Pinot Noir. Many blancs de noirs are blends of both Pinot Noir and Meunier, and some are pure Meunier. So, what were we looking for, and did we all seek the same thing? Despite the possibility of Meunier in the mix, I suppose we were (subconsciously at least) searching for the purest expression of Pinot—or at least a certain singularity that marks out a Champagne as something special. It is perfectly legitimate to search for Pinot character in Meunier, because the best Meuniers definitely show some true Pinot fruit, whether produced sparkling or as a still red wine. The lighter, more floral aromas that pervade 90 percent of the Meunier in Champagne can be attributed to the terroir in which they are grown, which I have to say is more than adequate for the purpose served by the Meunier.

Though some judges tend to score higher than others, when it comes to how we ranked the wines, there was very little disagreement, particularly over which were the top or bottom two or three Champagnes. Both Bollinger Vieilles Vignes Françaises and Krug Clos d'Ambonnay stood out to such a degree that they attracted the highest scores awarded

by all three tasters. None of the tasters gave such high scores to any other wines in the lineup. I was not at all surprised by the outstanding performance of Bollinger Vieilles Vignes Françaises, of course, but if I had not tasted the Krug Clos d'Ambonnay 1998 a couple of times prior to this tasting, I would have been very surprised to see Krug on level pegging. While the first vintage of Krug Clos d'Ambonnay, the 1995, attracted huge praise from critics around the world, I was less enamored. Without doubt, the 1995 was a good Champagne, but it was not special and nowhere near the class and quality of Krug's “standard” Vintage 1995. It might not have been as disappointing qualitatively as, say, the Krug Clos du Mesnil 1990 (which has always been blown away under blind conditions by the massively underrated 1992), but it was a dismal failure on a dollar-for-dollar basis for what was, after all, the world's first \$3,000 Champagne. The 1998 is, however, a completely different story. It is pure class, pure Pinot, and the equal of Bollinger Vieilles Vignes Françaises 1998, albeit in a vastly dissimilar style. Champagne needed another truly great blanc de noirs to push others to greater heights—and with the third release of Clos d'Ambonnay, we finally have it. Champagne also needs an iconic pure Meunier, but whether Krug can find a suitable *clos* in its beloved Leuvrigny or Ste-Gemme has yet to be revealed. In the meantime, the Meunier that stands out is definitely Jérôme Prévost's La Closerie Les Béguines, though that is more of a preference of Simon and myself. Chartogne-Taillet Les Barres Parcel de Merfy and Moutardier Pure Meunier Brut Nature (which has come on in leaps and bounds over the past few years) also appealed, but Essi was less impressed by Meunier in general. There does, however, need to be an iconic Meunier to which others can aspire, and Prévost is closest to achieving that status. One absence should be noted: Egly-Ouriet's Issue de Pinot Meunier Les Vignes de Vriigny.



Bollinger Vieilles Vignes Françaises Blanc de Noirs Brut 1998 (12% ABV) - 19.5

EA: Deep golden color. Fine creamy and toasty developed nose, with lots of layers. Flowers, yeast, bruised apples, and soft spiciness. Rich palate, with stylish creamy mousse. Voluptuous, harmonious and velvety. Complete, with plenty of character. **19.5**

SF: Rich evolved color; truffley nose, with an attractive savory profile and a palate that, with no lack of nonchalance, confirms the reputation of both the vintage in question and this particular category of Champagne. Bravo! **18.5**

TS: A superlative blanc de noirs, equal in its own way to [the Krug Clos d'Ambonnay 1998]. Not quite the intensity of [the Krug], but even more finesse. This Champagne is simply blistering on the nose. Really quite extraordinary. They both have their own balance that makes them equally great for totally different reasons. **20**



Krug Clos d'Ambonnay 1998 (12% ABV) - 19.5

EA: Deep golden color with a peachy hue. Layered nose that opens in the glass. Deep and multidimensional. Spice, wood, honey, burned sugar. Powerful on the palate, which shows oaky tones. Superbly fine mousse. Smooth, calm, and concentrated. Big boy. **19.5**

SF: Deep, mature color, with hints of Spanish gold; an attractive nose of mushroom, figs, and dried fruit. An elegant palate, just tiring a little, but with the wisdom of age and experience to delight the many aficionados of such a style. **18.5**

TS: Hint of copper in the color. The quintessence of Pinot Noir, so pure and so bright. The toast-laden aromatic notes are just the beginning of this stellar Champagne's long and slow evolution. What more could even the fussiest Champagne lover expect or demand from a blanc de noirs? Uniquely expressive; pure class! **20**

Devaux Blanc de Noirs Brut NV (12% ABV) - 18

EA: Deep golden color. Lovely nose of sweet toastiness, vanilla, and coffee. Wide, round, and velvety on the fresh, lively palate. Fine mousse. Long and compact, with all the pieces in place. **17.5**

SF: Foursquare, rather muscular nose; the mouthfeel is equally assertive; citric notes allied to chalk and stone fruit; with a few minutes in the glass, secondary aromas of fig and dried fruit invade the stage and insure a happy denouement. **17.5**

TS: A different tasting for a different magazine, but I have to make the same point for the second time in three days: what a difference proper post-disgorgement aging makes to the quality of the wine. Beautifully refined Pinot fruit. Delicious yet classy. **18.5**

Dosnon & Lepage Récolte Noir NV (12% ABV) - 17.5

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Deep nose of toast, wax, vanilla, and candied fruit. Gentle oak touch. Muscular and firm, with intense fruitiness and crisp acidity. Good line from beginning until the long end. Well made. **17**

SF: Lively mousse and youthful nose, with a pinch of oak evidenced. Palate is accordingly muscular, stretching its sinews toward the distant lights of an elegant future. **16.5**

TS: With huge character and developing finesse, the rich yeast-complex aromas in the flavor of this blanc de noirs extend from classic soft red fruits, through the orchard and stone fruits more commonly associated with Chardonnay, to hints of creamy sauce anglaise of minimal-impact malolactic. The color is surprisingly light,

with flecks of green; the luminosity is clear and bright; the acidity is perfectly balanced; the mousse is there, but it is so unobtrusive that it has to be searched for. This is a Champagne whose slow evolution I would love to follow in my own cellar. **19**



Serge Mathieu Blanc de Noirs Brut NV (12% ABV) - 17.5

EA: Medium-deep peachy color. Sweet nose of confectionary and peach. Clean, juicy, and fruity palate, with fresh, appetizing finish. Unaggressive mousse and acidity. Pleasant and easy-going. **17.5**

SF: Attractive nose of summer flowers, sour honey, and yellow fruit; honest and appealing. The palate has the weight of mature fruit and extensive bottle aging, with autolytic notes lending interest and quite a grippy, rich finish. **16.5**

TS: The *dosage* is showing a little on the nose, but not at all over-dosed on the authentically brut palate, thus will tame down given a little more post-disgorgement aging. Lovely acids enhance the long, beautifully focused finish. **18**



Billecart-Salmon Le Clos St-Hilaire Brut 1998 (12% ABV) - 17

EA: Deep golden color, with a peachy tinge. Pronounced and deep toasty nose, with dried fruit, orange marmalade, and honey. Powerful, full, and dense on the palate, which

“The toast-laden aromatic notes are just the beginning of this stellar Champagne's long, slow evolution. What more could even the fussiest Champagne lover expect or demand from a blanc de noirs? Uniquely expressive; pure class!”—Tom Stevenson on Krug Clos d'Ambonnay 1998

is lifted by a fine acidic spine. Long and concentrated. Started to show oxidation quickly in the glass. **17.5**

SF: Mature nose with a complex interplay between stone fruit and sour honey; almonds and flowers in the background. The palate is equally engaging, albeit in the style that will please those who like their Champagne mellow and mature, with tertiary aromas starting to come to the fore. **17.5**
TS: Barley and malt aromas detract. **16.5**

Canard-Duchêne Charles VII Blanc de Noirs Brut NV (12% ABV) - 17

EA: Medium-deep color, with red hues. Soft red-fruit nose, with very gentle yeast impact. Wide and round on the loose palate. Foamy mousse and a short, fruit-forward finish. **16.5**

SF: Soft coloring, with a romantic glimpse of old gold. The wine has aromatics from the orchard, with a hint of sour honey and brioche, then a palate that draws in on itself a little, with stone fruits to the fore and a substratum of chalk to lend support and insure balance. A fine measured finish which recalls mandarin and fig. **17**

TS: Some toffee aromas that quickly disappear; easy-drinking, soft. **17**

Richard Cheurlin Carte d'Or Brut (12.5% ABV) - 17

EA: Pale lemon color. Fresh, youthful lemon, peach-candy, and white-flower nose. Light palate, with a noticeable *dosage*. Fluffy mousse and medium-finish. **15**

SF: Gentle color and an unassuming nose of green apple and a touch of hay. The palate is rounded, with fruits from the redder end of the spectrum in the ascendant. Balanced and concentrated, a very typical blanc de noirs, with a pleasingly delicate but savory finish to underwrite this assertion. **16.5**

TS: Lovely, sumptuous, pure Pinot fruit of great finesse; very satisfying and classy, with a gorgeous, soft, silky mousse. **19**

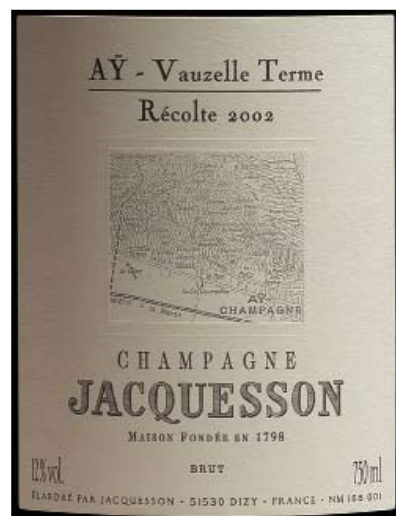
Fluteau Blanc de Noirs Brut (12% ABV) - 17

EA: Pale lemon color, with a touch of pink. Stylish, understated nose of ripe green apple, pear candy, and floral notes. Light, fresh, and energetic palate, with bright fruit and a pleasant, smooth texture. Not very complex but mouthwatering and enjoyable. **16.5**

SF: Soft lemony coloring; unassuming nose of orchard fruit, with a hint of oyster shell. The palate is broader than expected, dry

yet with confident depth. Notes of plum skin and yellow fruit are elegantly entwined in a pleasing structure. A modest sonata, yet one that sticks in the memory. **16.5**

TS: A beautiful Champagne, lovely, juicy fruits, more soft stone fruits than soft red or black fruit, with a thread of juicy white peach. I love it! **18.5**



Jacquesson Vauzelle Terme Brut 2002 (12% ABV) - 17

EA: Deep golden color, with onion-skin tinge. Smooth, complex, evolved nose of dried apricots, wax, candied fruit, and viennoiserie. Less fruit on the palate, which is wide and deep and thick but not very lively. Some signs of oxidation. Long, drying finish. **16**

SF: Complex nose, with flowers, slate, orchard fruit, and spice all evidenced. The palate is finely structured, with a mineral backdrop, very pure acidity and real persistence. Powerful red-fruit notes at the heart of the performance are starting to show their worth, nearly a decade later, with all the supporting actors strutting confidently across the stage. **17.5**

TS: Voluminous bready-biscuity-whisky aromas and an almost-puckering finish. Needs a good 18 months' additional post-disgorgement aging. **17.5**

Pannier Brut Blanc de Noirs Cuvée Louis Eugène Brut 2006 (12% ABV) - 17

EA: Deep lemon-gold color. Fragrant nose of confectionary, viennoiserie, cream, and flowers. Soft, fruity, and fresh palate. Lightweight with medium length. Interesting aromas and lively palate. **16.5**

SF: Youthful nose, with citric fruit and white

peach, and behind that something a little more interesting—*sauvage*, almost; this translates well on to the palate, with the natural ripeness of the vintage captured and harnessed into a plate of definition, power, and length. It tires a little on second tasting, however. **16**

TS: Rich and satisfying vanilla-dusted redcurrants and dried fruit—this Champagne is excellent but really needs a couple of years to show its full potential. **18**

Jérôme Prévost La Closerie Les Béguines Extra Brut (12.5% ABV) - 17

EA: Medium-deep straw color, with pink hues. Fresh, fruit-driven nose of ripe apple and gentle spiciness. Very dry and tart on the palate, which could use more sugar. Juicy and fleshy but straightforward. **15**

SF: Gentle lemon coloring belies an attractive nose with floral elements, backed up by stone fruit and a splash of honey. Palate is a serious, low-*dosage* example, flinty and long, with taut acidity and a pebbly surface; a reward of white chocolate on the finish. A sermon in stone. **17.5**

TS: Very fresh, firm, assertive Pinot fruit, supported by an excellent pincushion mousse that will get even better as the wine evolves. Not as deep or as rich as some, but it has an intensity suggesting a core of undeveloped extract. It also has more class than most blancs de noirs and should develop both complexity and finesse over the next year or two. **18.5**

Chartogne-Taillet Les Barres Parcel de Merfy Extra Brut NV (12.5% ABV) - 16.5

EA: Deep, lemon-gold color. Rich, toasty nose of smoke, pastry, and red fruit. Wide palate, which is too drying at finish. Low on fruit overall. Some oxidative signs. Lacks vivacity. **15**

SF: An elegant fountain of bubbles, straw coloring, and a powerful autolytic nose with Marmite, biscuit, and meringue evidenced. This appeal is a little tempered by the palate, which lacks expected weight and *nervosité*; a mature example with a vinous character. This will have its followers; it has the depth of an Old Master, with symphonic perspective. **16.5**

TS: Classic blanc de noirs dried-fruit richness on the palate. There is a tiny oxidative note on the aftertaste, which could be a bit niggling to the purists but perfectly acceptable if it does not increase. I would risk aging it for 12-18 months. **17.5**

Paul Déthune Grand Blanc de Noirs Brut NV (12.5% ABV) - 16.5

EA: Medium-deep peachy color. Fresh, simple, ripe red-apple nose. Soft, spicy character with licorice. Fruity, with accentuated acidity and linear, firm structure. Long and fruity. **17.5**

SF: Bruised apple and peach kernel, with a gentle topping of vanillin, which translates into a dollop of sweetness on the palate; hitherto a little unresolved but promising a lot, such are the benevolence and quality of the underlying fruit. **16.5**

TS: Very rich Pinot fruit spoiled by an oxidative note to the nose. **15**

Fleury NV Blanc de Noirs Brut (12.5% ABV) - 16.5

EA: Medium-deep peachy color. Bruised apple, apple jam, and spice on the soft nose. More substantial on the fleshy palate. Fluffy mousse and medium-long finish. Despite some oxidative notes, a pleasant, round wine of some depth and intensity. **17**

SF: Deeply colored, then an assertive toasty nose, with forest floor and white chocolate evidenced. The palate has concentration and ripeness, balanced sugar and an

almost-tannic architecture. From the more expressive end of the spectrum, a worthy expression of Pinot power. **16.5**

TS: Lovely, rich, yeast-complexed Pinot fruit spoiled by an oxidative character that pervades the wine. **16**



Benoît Lahaye Blanc de Noirs Prestige Brut NV (12% ABV) - 16.5

EA: Medium-deep peachy color. Overt, even

ESSI AVELLAN'S VERDICT

Because blanc de noirs is scarcer than blanc de blancs, this tasting was a rare treat. One seldom gets such a lineup that includes the most sought-after bottles, Krug Clos d'Ambonnay and Bollinger Vieilles Vignes Françaises, side by side with the most exiting grower Champagnes.

Krug and Bollinger clearly occupied the places at the top of my list, but it was impossible for me to decide which one I preferred. VVF charmed with its grand personality, whereas the Clos d'Ambonnay was so impressive and perfected; its mousse was the finest I have tasted for a good while. Clos d'Ambonnay just seems to be getting finer vintage by vintage.

Among the large-scale producers' wines, the toasty and sweet, fruity Devaux was a happy surprise, as was the Canard-Duchêne Charles VII. Most Champagnes tasted were small growers'

single-vineyard wines or subregional blends. Though these wines do not showcase the complexity of large-scale blends, one-dimensionality was not the problem. Pehu-Simonet Grand Cru Blanc de Noirs and Marie-Noëlle Ledru Cuvée de Goulté were examples of vivacious wines with bright fruitiness. The wines I least preferred showed heaviness and signs of excessive oxidation, which seem all-too-common character traits in blanc de noirs Champagnes. Moreover, the fact that some of these were extra brut or *brut nature* left them too austere.

Interestingly, the tasting included some 100 percent Pinot Meunier Champagnes. Even though they did not make their way to the very top of my list, wines like Chartogne-Taillet Les Barres and Jérôme Prévost Closerie des Béguines proved that, with skillful growing and winemaking, interesting wines can be achieved.

Top wines

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Dosnon & Lepage Récolte Noir NV 17
François Diligent Extra Brut (No Dosage) 17
Fleury NV Blanc de Noirs Brut 17
Marie-Noëlle Ledru Cuvée du Goulté Blanc de Noirs Brut 2007 17
Pehu-Simonet Grand Cru Blanc de Noirs Brut NV 17

pungent nose of overripe apple and apricot marmalade. Wide and round on the palate. One-dimensional but very fruit-driven. Slightly too dry at finish. **15**

SF: Pinprick bubbles and a lively mousse. Nose a little reserved; an underused hay loft; *en bouche*, there is an unexpected roundness, with a fruit profile dominated by white peach, nectarine, and rosehip. Balancing acidity and subtle *dosage*. **16.5**

TS: This has an immediate richness on the palate and finish, lovely redcurrant and dried fruits, with a vanilla-dusted finish. Delightful. Can be drunk now but will improve. **17.5**

Pehu-Simonet Grand Cru Blanc de Noirs Brut NV (12.5% ABV) - 16.5

EA: Medium-deep, peach-hued color. Pleasantly toasty, ripe apricot nose. Pastry and cinnamon. Mouthwatering acidity on the medium-bodied palate. Vivacious and fruity, with some layers. **17**

SF: Toasty nose, almost caramelized, with fruit from the more exotic end of the spectrum. The palate is rich and textured but is perhaps a shade hollow, lacking a core of self-belief. **15**

TS: Rich red fruits, with a tangy finish, gently supported by a fine mousse. Very enjoyable. **17**



François Diligent Extra Brut No Dosage (12% ABV) (100% Pinot Noir) - 16

EA: Deep golden color. Soft, evolved, slightly oxidizing nose of toast, toffee, and dried apricots. Weighty on the round palate. Creamy mousse, but dryness of the finish does not match the sweet fruit. Short finish, with some tartness. **17**

SF: Rather deep straw coloring, then notes of the bakery at the end of the day when trade has been passably good. Palate is uncompromising, dry, and a little laconic; dried-fruit profile with a hint of sourdough. Lacks a little finesse and fizz, but fits the zero-*dosage* billing perfectly. **15.5**

TS: Old-gold color; apricot, and marmalade aromas; astringent redcurrant fruit, with a light but firm mousse that is almost irrelevant to the wine. If given a softer mousse and a little *dosage*, this would be so much better. **16**

Drappier Pinot Noir Brut Nature Zéro Dosage NV (12% ABV) - 16

EA: Medium-deep, peach-hued, straw-yellow color. Mild and soft apricot and candied fruit nose. Round and fruit-forward palate, drying toward the end. Clean, fresh, and easy-going.

“Powerful red-fruit notes at the heart of the performance are starting to show their worth, nearly a decade later, with all the supporting actors strutting confidently across the stage”
—Simon Field on Jacquesson Vauzelle Terme Brut 2002

Nicely balanced and pleasant. 15

SF: Attractive nose of oyster shell, flint, and acacia. Palate has an uncompromising austerity, firm citric acidity, and a no-nonsense Calvinistic sense of its own worth. A more-than-comfortable match for dishes of a crustacean persuasion. 16

TS: Fresh and crisp, with dried fruit supported by a firm mousse. If this had a dosage, it would benefit from a year or two additional post-disgorgement aging, but without a dosage, it really should be consumed on purchase. 16.5

Moutardier Pure Meunier Brut Nature NV (12% ABV) - 16

EA: Medium-deep peachy color. Mild, soft, stone-fruit nose. Quite unexpressive on both nose and palate. Very dry and a bit austere on the finish. Lacks charm and character. 14
SF: Exuberant mousse and attractive lemon coloring; a subtle nose of brioche, with hints of pear skin and sour honey. Expectations confirmed by the palate with its Doric structure, citric core, and elegant buttressing

acidity. Linear and long; revealing finesse for a blanc de noirs example. 17.5

TS: Delicate, vanilla-dusted red fruits, supported by a fine mousse on the palate but really needs 12-24 months further aging to develop the aromas to match. 17



Barnaut Grand Cru Blanc de Noirs Brut NV (12.5% ABV) - 15.5

EA: Medium-deep color with peachy hues. Gently floral and fragrant nose with character. Light, pleasant yeasty touch. Fruity and fleshy on the palate. Balanced dosage and medium-length. 16

SF: Large bubbles, a rather insipid color, and a reticence on the nose. Palate has a

“soupy” feel, lacking in etched definition or clarity of self-expression. 14

TS: Lovely mousse supporting citrus-infused soft red fruits. 17



Mailly Grand Cru Blanc de Noirs Brut NV (12% ABV) - 15.5

EA: Medium-deep peach-hued color. Pungent floral nose, with some hay notes. Less so on the palate. Firm and structured but with a drying, dusty finish. Austere. 14

SF: Expressive nose of brioche, sour honey, and tobacco. The palate is far from subtle, with a grippy fruit profile dominated by late-season apples and plum skins; quite stentorian in scope, a little bullying in its demeanor. An archetypical blanc de noirs, in other words... 16.5

TS: A touch of light straw on the nose but fresh, with easy-drinking yet quite fine fruit on the palate. 16.5

De Venoge Réserve Blanc de Noirs Brut NV (12% ABV) - 15.5

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Stylish, gently toasty nose of soft fruitiness. Less interesting on the very dry palate. Crisp and firm but lacks fruit character. Medium-long with citric finish. 14.5

SF: Attractive nose of yellow fruit and wet pebbles after light rain. Palate is linear, with gentle red fruit in perfect counterpoint to the underlying citric descriptors. Harmonious in terms of both dosage and acidity, the wine impresses by its length and its colors. 16

TS: Fresh, sherbet-like fruit, with fleeting counterintuitively citrus notes. This is not classic blanc de noirs, but it's not unenjoyable, either. 16.5

Marie-Noëlle Ledru Cuvée du Goulte Blanc de Noirs Brut 2007 (12% ABV) - 15.5

EA: Medium-deep peachy color. Fragrant nose of candy and floral notes. Fresh, vivacious, and linear on the palate. Youthful, with some depth and potential. Medium-long, bright fruity, citric finish. 17

SF: Relatively recently bottled vintage, the wine nonetheless impresses with its clean and forthright nose of fig, forest floor, and wild strawberry. The palate is quite muscular and rich, with an almost tannic backdrop slightly undermining the structure—or perhaps that should be underpinning the structure. 15.5

TS: Fresh, light, high acids, clean, and very correct, but nothing outstanding. 14

Gonet-Médeville Blanc de Noirs Premier Cru Brut NV (12.5% ABV) - 15

EA: Deep peach-hued color. Soft red fruit nose with apricot. Full, round, and tart on the palate. Not completely clean. Medium length and foamy mousse. 14

SF: Pink-tinted, this wine has a mature nose of autumnal windfalls and dried flowers. The palate has red-berry power, plenty of grip and self-belief, and as a corollary, a relative lack of elegance. Old-school blanc de noirs. 16

TS: Oxidative nose spoils an otherwise excellent Champagne of some significant intensity. Oxidative-Champagne lovers should love this. 15.5



GH Mumm Mumm de Verzenay Blanc de Noirs Brut NV (12% ABV) - 15

EA: Deep golden color. Soft pastry-and-toffee nose, showing some evolution. Confectionary and red fruit. Low on fruit, with notes of oxidation. Wide and smooth, mature palate. Not for cellaring. 14

SF: Nose of burned honeycomb and Dickensian parlors; palate maintains these leitmotifs with lapidary certainty; a touch sulfurous and therefore short on definition despite an intrinsic RD-esque quality. 15.5

TS: Characterful but, to be super-critical, a touch rustic and lacking focus. 15.5



François Diligent Brut (12% ABV) (100% Pinot Noir) - 14.5

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Stylish, gently toasty nose, with yellow apple and vanilla. Fruity and juicy on the one-dimensional but fresh palate. Medium-long drying finish. This is faultless but uninteresting. 14.5

SF: Straw coloring, with a hint of green; summer flowers on the nose, with citrus and Mirabelle plum, too. The palate is fuller, marginally richer than expected, but as a function of ripeness rather than overindulgence with the dosage. A toasty, focused mid-palate, leaving one just a little disappointed by a rather short finish. 15.5

TS: This is atypically floral for a blanc de noirs, with clean, crisp, but somewhat anonymous fruit on the palate. While it is okay as an apéritif Champagne, it does not quite cut the mustard for a specialist cuvée. 14

Pouillon 2XOZ 2004 (12.5% ABV) - 13

EA: Deep golden color, with onion-skin hue. Pronounced, evolved nose of baked apple, honey, and dried fruit. Fruit has died, has strongly oxidative character. Unpleasant dry, pungent finish. 11

SF: Deep, almost maderized color; too old and too oxidized. Too bad. 13.5

TS: Dark color, quite oxidative, lovely soft mousse—just a pity it could not be more reductive. Not very nice on the finish: bitter aftertaste. The more you let the finish come down, the more it comes back up! 15

Jacques Selosse Lieux-Dits La Côte Faron Grand Cru NV Extra Brut (12.5% ABV) - 10

EA: Deep, golden peachy color. Unpleasant, wax-and-hay nose, with strange floral tones. Very pungent on the wide palate. Heavy and unrefined. 10

SF: Deep color, and a resoundingly unattractive nose of last season's flowers. Palate is better, but the sense of decay never entirely vacates the premises. 10.5

TS: Old straw, oxidative, unbalanced. 10



Moutard Vignes Beugneux Côte des Bar Pinot Noir NV Extra Dry (12% ABV) - 11

EA: First bottle was faulty. Deep golden color. Evolving toasty nose, with bruised apple-and-wax character with lactic notes. Round and fleshy on the palate, which feels heavy. Powerful but unrefined, lacking freshness. 14

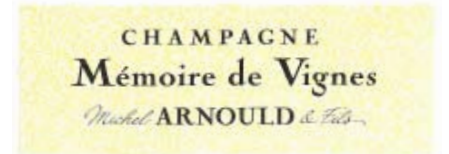
SF: Oxidized, bruised apple, quite ungainly. (Bottle 2 was no better for me.) 9
TS: First bottle odd: maderized, lifeless. Second bottle much warmer, but clean, not maderized, nor lifeless. However, it's not particularly exciting either. 10.5

The following wines arrived after the main tasting but were tasted, not blind, by Simon Field and Tom Stevenson shortly afterward.

Michel Arnould Carte d'Or Millime 2005 Grand Cru - 16

SF: Straw coloring, slightly evolved, then an impressive and persistent mousse, with small bubbles. It has a distinctive, powerful nose of late-picked orchard fruit, Mirabelle plums, and, beyond that, lemon-scented cream and a hint of praline or pain au chocolat—something from the patisserie, in any event. Dense and quite muscular mouthfeel, with classic grand cru blanc de noirs power; Granny Smith apples, with savory hints and well-judged dosage. 16.5

TS: Full, rich, and masculine, but with a touch of dry straw. Could do with more finesse, though that probably has more to do with the vintage than the producer. 15



Michel Arnould Mémoire de Vignes Blanc de Noirs 2005 Grand Cru Brut - 17

SF: Deeper color than the Carte d'Or, with a modestly golden luster. A persistent mousse and forthright, attractive nose, dominated by tropical fruit, crème brûlée, and a hint of fig. A big-boned palate, with a dense and finely etched structure—indeed, it has such definition that there may well have been oak used for the first fermentation... If not that, there is an incredible weight of concentrated grand cru fruit. The acidity is balanced and harmonious, with savory elements in perfect counterpoint to the ripe yellow fruit and a strong, if rather precocious finish. Classy, distinctive, and self-confident. 17.5
TS: Much tighter, fresher, and younger, with fine autolytic finesse on the nose, this cuvée punches well above its weight for the vintage and should repay cellaring for another two or three years at least. 16.5

Cédric Bouchard Roses de Jeanne Lieu-Dit Les Ursules - 17.5

TS: The sulfur is currently in burned-matchstick mode, which will gradually and almost literally become toast. I wish this process could be slower evolving and consequently less obvious, but it's still going to thrill lovers of toasty Champagne, and its fabulous acidity will insure a long life. 17.5

SIMON FIELD'S VERDICT

This was a most satisfactory tasting, which, despite the relative modesty of its scope, served as an excellent demonstration of the quality inherent in this somewhat underrated category. And it is underrated for no apparent reason, since black grapes make up two thirds of the vineyards and are key components in some of the most famous of all Champagnes, lending red-fruit power and a savory backbone to a blend.

The two flag-bearers were, are, and always will be Bollinger Vieilles Vignes Françaises and Krug Clos d'Ambonnay, the latter having now established itself despite relative youth—conceptually, that is to say, and at a price tag that is far from modest. Today, from the still-underrated 1998 vintage, both wines were sublime. They led by example and exemplified stylistic characteristics that focused on elegance and restraint—almost diametrically opposed to my initial expectations of rawness, with flavors redolent of bruised apples and charcuterie. It is encouraging to see a second wave of deluxe exemplars,

admirably led today by the fruits of other small single vineyards: Jacquesson's Vauzelle Terme and Billecart-Salmon's Clos St-Hilaire. The only trouble with the four wines mentioned so far is that their aggregate production will amount to only a few hundred cases; it was encouraging, therefore, that some of the more voluminous wines were also singing.

Other positive features that came to my attention were the impressive performances by the smaller growers (Benoît Lahaye, Paul Déthune, and Jérôme Prévost); the quality of wines from the well-known Aube producers (Drappier and Serge Matthieu); the inherent quality evidenced in standalone Pinot Meunier (Moutardier); and the black grapes' more-than-satisfactory interreaction with low sugar levels.

All in all, this was a very positive tasting. If the famous names provide what the French describe as the “locomotives” of the category, it is pleasing to report that the rest of the train is also running smoothly and, if anything, a little ahead of schedule.

Top wines

- Bollinger Vieilles Vignes Françaises Blanc de Noirs Brut 1998 18.5
- Krug Clos d'Ambonnay 1998 18.5
- Billecart-Salmon Le Clos St-Hilaire Brut 1998 17.5
- Devaux Blanc de Noirs Brut NV 17.5
- Jacquesson Vauzelle Terme Brut 2002 17.5

- Moutardier Pure Meunier Brut Nature NV 17.5
- Jérôme Prévost La Closerie Les Béguines Extra Brut 17.5
- Canard-Duchêne Charles VII Blanc de Noirs Brut NV 17