

WINES THAT ARE MOSTLY APPROACHABLE WITH ENJOYMENT NOW

NON-VINTAGE CHAMPAGNE NO YEAR, EVERY REASON

Tom Stevenson hosts an NV Champagne tasting with Essi Avellan MW and Michael Edwards, including some of the celebrity-endorsed so-called hip-hop or bling offerings. Apart from the consensus on the top wine, there are interesting differences of perspective, as well as a few surprises that prompt reflection on value

Let's start with the term itself: Non-Vintage. Is it, as Essi Avellan MW argues here, "a negative name"? And if it is, would the "already utilized term Multi-Vintage" make "a much better alternative"? Since Essi's rise to prominence among Champagne specialists, I have tended to agree with almost all of her views—but not this one. Non-Vintage is no more negative than, say, non-flammable; it does what it says on the can or, in this case, the bottle. Non-Vintage simply means that it is not sold as a Vintage or, as the original French term states, it is sold *sans année*—without year. It is simply a descriptive term that in both French and English is neither negative nor positive.

Multi-Vintage, on the other hand, clearly implies a Champagne that has been blended from not just any old years, but from Vintage years. This could accurately apply to Cattier's Clos du Moulin, for example, since that cuvée is unquestionably a blend of three Vintage years, but it would be misleading to apply this term to the vast majority of Champagnes that are currently sold as Non-Vintage cuvées. Furthermore, if it would be misleading to sell most Non-Vintage blends as Multi-Vintage, it would be blatantly deceptive to apply this term to Non-Vintage cuvées that are the product of a single year. Such cuvées are particularly common among Champagne growers, but they are also occasionally produced by larger houses (such as Mumm de Cramant). So, Non-Vintage should not be replaced. It is by far the most logical description, and since this category accounts for nearly 90 percent of the entire Champagne market, its use has evidently not been any hindrance to sales. If any individual producer finds the term negative, he can always ignore it. No one is forced to print Non-Vintage on the label; the only requirement is for such Champagnes not to indicate a single vintage.



Inclusions and exclusions

The Non-Vintage (NV) category could therefore encompass every type of Champagne produced, including the product of a single year, providing that the year in question is not mentioned on the label. We did not include any rosé, blancs de blancs, or blancs de noirs because we wanted to focus on the classic concept of an entry-level NV blend of two or more varieties. Exclusion of rosé is self-explanatory, and we had already held a separate tasting for blancs de noirs (*WFW* 34, pp.168–75), but we agonized over blancs de blancs. Since lots of entry-level NV blanc de blancs cuvées are produced by growers, especially from

the Côte des Blancs, the vast majority of whom do not produce a NV blend of more than one grape variety, we realized from an early stage that any exclusion of NV blancs de blancs would disenfranchise a significant number of producers. In the end, however, it was deemed the lesser of two evils, because of the knock-on effect. A couple of blancs de blancs did inadvertently creep through the submission process, but the reasoning for excluding the category as a whole was that, had we included the entry-level blancs de blancs from the growers, we would have been obliged to include NV blancs de blancs from the houses—and such cuvées are not entry-level cuvées but are sold at a premium, which would have been an unfair comparison. We will invite growers to submit their NV blancs de blancs to a future tasting.

Bling

The asking price of entry-level NV bling Champagnes such as Armand de Brignac's Ace of Spades (£195) and Mariah Carey's Angel (£540) was so high that we included a few premium-quality cuvées (Gosset Grande Réserve, Lanson Extra Aged, Laurent-Perrier Grand Siècle Grande Cuvée, and so on) to give the bling Champagne some pricier competition.

Our mistake was segregating these Champagnes (identified by an asterisk in the notes) in their own separate flight. Not only did this fail to compare the bling with normally priced NV Champagnes, but it raises the question of whether we were any tougher in scoring these wines. And if we were, we were we unfairly harsh on the Pol Roger Extra Cuvée de Réserve, which mysteriously appeared in this flight? It would have been more interesting to see if the bling and more widely recognized premium-quality Champagnes stood out from entry-level NV cuvées within the anonymity of one blind tasting rather than two. Nobody who appreciates wine to the extent that they subscribe to *The World of Fine Wine* would expect any wine that is five or ten times the price to score five or ten times as many points, but if the price is justified, they should at least stand out. Splitting this tasting into two parts did not provide a direct

Mumm), and Régis Camus at Charles & Piper-Heidsieck (formerly Jacquart), to name only a few. They all start their work by constructing the base wine via a number of blending exercises collectively known as the *assemblage*. This classically combines *vins clairs* and reserve wines, but contrary to popular belief, the reserve wines have very little to do with achieving any consistency of house style. It is the origin, type, and range of the most recent *vins clairs* that determine the house style. If any *chef de caves* has to rely on reserve wines to create a house style each year, then he has lost the plot. The primary reason why reserve wines are added is to make intrinsically young Champagnes eminently drinkable ahead of their time. This is because entry-level NV Champagnes do not have the luxury of being left in the cellars until they are ready. They account for the bulk of sales and indeed profits, so their turnover must be maintained. Reserve

For Champagne houses large or small, Non-Vintage is the ultimate test for the *chef de caves*, and whether he or she passes that test will depend not only on individual skill and experience, but also on the depth and breadth of the available reserve wines

comparison, but not even Essi, who scored both bling Champagnes the highest, was able to recommend either on the basis of value. And as Michael asks, "Wouldn't you rather have the lovely Clos du Moulin at a fraction of the price of Armand de Brignac—both from Cattier?"

A matter of reserves

What exactly is a classic entry-level NV Champagne anyway? For Champagne houses large or small, it is the ultimate test for the *chef de caves*, and whether he or she passes that test will depend not only on individual skill and experience but also on the depth and breadth of the available reserve wines. The greatest *chefs de caves* can go from one house to another and produce award-winning cuvées in entirely different house styles—as demonstrated by Dominique Petit at Pol Roger (formerly at Krug), Eric Lebel at Deutz (formerly Champagne Palmer), Dominique Demarville at Veuve Clicquot (formerly

wines also improve the quality when the base wine is from a lesser year, and they are required to smooth away the bolder characteristics when the base wine is from a greater year. In general, this means that more reserve wines are used when the base-wine year is either very bad or very good. The role they play is part of making young Champagnes drinkable and has very little to do with achieving any form of consistency.

Most producers add just 10–15 percent of reserve wine from the previous two or three years, but some use as much as 40 percent, while others will add much less reserve wine but from a greater number of older vintages. There are always variations on any theme—Bollinger, for example, blends approximately 45 percent each of the current and previous years with 5–10 percent of reserve wines kept in magnum and going back 15 years or so. Most growers have

Average and range of scores

	Average	Range
Tom Stevenson	15	5.5–19
Essi Avellan MW	15.5	11–19
Michael Edwards	16	13–18
All wines	15.5	5.5–19

Tom Stevenson's top wines

Charles Heidsieck Brut Réserve 19
D de Devaux Brut 18.5
Louis Barthélémy Brut Améthyste 18.5
Pannier Sélection Extra Vieillessement Brut 18.5
Laurent-Perrier Brut 18.5
Louis Roederer Brut Premier 18.5
Gosset Excellence Brut 18
Moët & Chandon Impérial Brut 17.5
Palmer Brut Réserve 17.5
Piper-Heidsieck Brut 17.5
Serge Mathieu Cuvée Prestige Brut 17.5
Vilmart Grande Réserve Brut Premier Cru 17.5

no reserve wines, thus their NV will be from a single year, as indicated above. Some growers have been known to sell their Champagne as an NV when it is young, then label exactly the same cuvée as a Vintage when it reaches the legal minimum age of three years. In recent years, some of the more open-minded growers have started to build up stocks of reserve wines, while others are going their own, highly individual way, producing multiple versions of terroir-based Champagnes. The whole grower-Champagne scene has become far more sophisticated and therefore interesting over the past five to ten years. Not before time, I might add. I've been waiting more than a quarter of a century for Champagne growers to pull their collective finger out.

One practice that is creeping into NV cuvées produced by growers and a few houses is the use of solera-based systems for storing reserve wine. I have always questioned the wisdom of solera-based reserve wine, primarily because it is such a restrictive practice, denying the blender the much wider range of blending components that reserve wines of different origin and age would offer. It flies in the face of the trend wherever possible to vinify on a parcel-by-parcel basis and to keep those individually expressive wines separate. At the *assemblage*, the range of blending components available for any specific Champagne is often compared to an artist's palette, and a solera system effectively mixes all the colors on a Champenois's palette into one murky mess. There is no opportunity to use a bit of this, lots of that, and none of something else. It's all mixed into one wine, leaving the winemaker just one option: how much to use. I am not saying that a good-quality Champagne cannot be made using a solera-based reserve wine, but there is no doubt that the chances of doing so are severely compromised; and even if it does happen, I would have to say that it could have been an even better Champagne had all the component parts of a solera-based reserve wine been individually available.

The results

According to Andrew Jefford's scale, which we use for all *WFW* tastings, any wine that scores between 14.5 and 16.5 is "very good, with some outstanding features." For many tasters, such a description defines a silver-medal quality, which in the UK and Australia would normally warrant a score of between 17 and 18.4 or thereabouts. This is why tasters have to be very careful to apply the uniquely correct judging criteria when tasting for *WFW*, and it is why readers have to be extremely cautious about how they interpret those results. Many readers zero in on wines of a certain score and above, and when they do that in *WFW*, they should bear in mind that a score of 14.5 is roughly equal to 17 in other publications.

If we take the silver-like score of 14.5 points as an arbitrary line above which it would be reasonable to suggest that any qualifying wine should be considered to have emerged with honors from any *WFW* tasting, then it had an 83 percent success rate according to the averaged scores of all three tasters; an 80 percent success rate according to Essi's scores; 96 percent according to Michael's scores; and 76 percent

according to mine. We were all impressed by the general standard of these NV Champagnes, particularly since the vast majority of wines tasted were entry-level. As Michael declared, "My scores say it all"; and as Essi observed, "Overall, the quality was highly satisfactory." Although we did not agree on our very best NV Champagnes (with the solitary exception of Charles Heidsieck Brut Réserve, the absolute top wine), our preferences were spread across all categories of producer: Essi divided the credit between seven houses (including six *grandes marques*), two growers, and two bling (one produced by a small house, one by a cooperative); Michael leaned, surprisingly for a champion of the growers, more heavily toward ten houses (including no fewer than nine *grandes marques*) and two growers; and I spread my highest scores across seven houses (including six *grandes marques*), two growers, and three cooperatives.

Essi is obviously a woman with a very expensive taste, having placed the two most expensive Champagnes in the tasting equal second. Her assessment of Armand de Brignac is entirely consistent with the high scores she has given this Champagne in *Fine Champagne*, the magazine she edits. She rates the hip-hop Champagne on a par with Mariah Carey's much more costly Angel and, indeed, Taittinger's Prélude Brut Grands Crus, which is not cheap but a snip by comparison, and another Champagne Essi has consistently scored highly. At just half a point lower, she placed another prestige cuvée, Laurent-Perrier's Grande Siècle, equal third. I was pleased to see that one of the other two Champagnes in her equal-third position was Philipponnat Royale Réserve Brut, since the current cuvée is a bit of a watershed for this Champagne. A wine of considerable character and structure, Philipponnat Royale Réserve Brut always shines at the table, where it comes into its own with food, but has often bombed in blind tastings, where it lacks finesse. At last, we have a blend that has finesse without compromising on either the character or structure, and I was just half a point out on 17, which on Andrew's scale is extremely impressive. For more information on the two bling Champagnes, see "The Kings of Bling" in my *À la Volée* column, *WFW* 32 & 33.

Michael certainly has a penchant for Canard-Duchêne, ranking two of the three cuvées entered as equal second. He had the lowest top score, just 18 points, but on Andrew's scale that is slap bang in the middle of the "outstanding wine of great beauty and articulacy" range, so it could be argued that he was more in line with *WFW*'s scoring system than Essi or I. Michael was also the taster whose best-scoring NV Champagnes (excluding the very top-scoring wine) overlapped those of the other two tasters, encompassing Taittinger Prélude Brut Grands Crus in Essi's list, and Gosset Excellence Brut and Laurent-Perrier Brut in my list.

The one and only

There is no doubt that Charles Heidsieck Brut Réserve stood out above the rest of the Champagnes in this tasting. All three tasters rated this Champagne in its own exclusive class, and both Michael and I must echo Essi's comment that

it came as no surprise. This NV Champagne has been in a class of its own since 1997, when the forward-thinking, uniquely talented Daniel Thibault relaunched Brut Réserve as Brut Réserve Mis en Cave. The *mis en cave* date (the year of bottling, which is the year after the date of the most recent harvest in the blend) was indicated on the front shoulder, but this caused confusion among general customers, who mistook it for a vintage year. To remedy this, the *mis en cave* was removed and the year of disgorgement introduced on the rear shoulder. The Mis en Cave name may no longer be evident on the bottle, but the methodology remains the same, involving no less than 40 percent reserve wines from up to eight previous vintages. As stated earlier, when it comes to the construction of a classic entry-level NV, the success of a *chef de caves* depends not only on individual skill and experience but also on the depth and breadth of the reserve wines that are available; and when Daniel Thibault tragically died in 2002, he left a fabulous collection of perfectly preserved reserve wines for his successor Régis Camus. Although I've known and respected

Baptiste Lécaillon, although his predecessor, Michel Pansu, also produced some stunning Champagnes. I have always considered Laurent-Perrier Brut capable of exceptional elegance, when it is on form, by which I mean when it has been released after sufficient time on yeast, as the bottle we tasted obviously has. Pannier's entry-level Brut has steadily improved over the past ten years as this cooperative on the very western periphery of Champagne has gained more access to increased volumes of grapes from the region's three classic districts under the Alliance Champagne grouping, so it does not come as a bolt from the blue to find its extra-aged Sélection Extra Vieillessement Brut performing so well. Vve Devaux, also part of Alliance Champagne, started showing great promise 20 years or more ago, thus the excellence of its D de Devaux Brut today was only to be expected. In fact, the only 18.5-point cuvée to catch me slightly unawares was the Louis Barthélémy Brut Améthyste. This small Champagne house has only come to the fore since becoming part of the Chancel family holdings (which includes Château Val

We were all impressed by the general standard of these NV Champagnes, particularly since the vast majority of wines tasted were entry-level. Although we did not agree on our very best NV Champagnes, our preferences were spread across all categories of producer

Régis since the 1980s, when he was at Jacquart, I must admit that I did wonder whether he, or indeed anyone, could fill his predecessor's shoes. Yet here we are ten years on, and this tasting demonstrated that Régis has not only maintained the very special quality of Charles Heidsieck but has also raised the quality of the Piper-Heidsieck range.

For an entry-level NV, Charles Heidsieck Brut Réserve is worth 19 points on any scale; but as my score of 18.5 indicates, I was also extremely impressed by D de Devaux Brut, Louis Barthélémy Brut Améthyste, Laurent-Perrier Brut, Pannier Sélection Extra Vieillessement Brut, and Louis Roederer Brut Premier, all of which I rated equal second. Before I award any wine a score as high as 18.5 points, the equivalent of a gold medal, I always consider the type of wine I am tasting and ask myself what more could I reasonably expect from a wine of this class and price? With 14.5 defined by such glowing terms under Andrew Jefford's scale, I have to be even more careful that I can justify awarding 18.5 points for any wine in a *WFW* tasting, but having asked myself the requisite question, I was totally convinced about these five Champagnes. Not that they are perfect—just that they are such impressive entry-level NV Champagnes that it would be unreasonable to expect anything more.

For Roederer Brut to be in this group was no surprise to me; Roederer is as good as a 2 million-plus bottle brand can be, and the quality has certainly improved under Jean-

Joannis in the Côtes du Lubéron) in 2002. Initially, the Champagnes were not of any particular note, but having followed these cuvées on a regular basis since 2006, the improvement in recent years has been such that by the 2009 edition of *Wine Report* I had listed Louis Barthélémy in my Top 10 list of Up-and-Coming Champagne producers. But while I was aware of its increasing quality, I must confess I had no idea that Louis Barthélémy had achieved quite such a high standard until this tasting.

Vilmart and Serge Mathieu have always been two of the greatest grower Champagnes I know, so I was very happy to see that they made my top 12. Palmer is a small, high-quality cooperative that even the most class-ridden houses respect, and Piper-Heidsieck's performance merely underscores how much effort Régis Camus has put into the volume side of Charles & Piper-Heidsieck's production. What astonished me the most about this tasting, however, was the 17.5 points that Moët & Chandon Impérial Brut thoroughly deserved. As I mentioned in *À la Volée* (*WFW* 35), there has been a noticeable stylistic shift in this Champagne over recent years, but who could have imagined that this 20 million-bottle cuvée has such richness and pronounced acidity? The sheer size of Moët sets it apart from every other Champagne house, but whereas for others that makes it such an easy target for negative jibes, for me it makes the quality all the more fantastic.



Charles Heidsieck Brut Réserve (12% ABV) - 18.5

EA: Deep lemon-gold color. An overt, rich, and generous nose of coffee, toast, tropical fruit, and vanilla. Very powerful and complex. Stylish, creamy mousse and a velvety texture. The intensity matches the expectations given by the nose. Very long, soft, and voluptuous. **19**

ME: Light mid-gold; a luxuriant touch of rich golden autolysis, honey, toast, a touch of leather on the nose. Beautiful confirmation on palate. Richness and maturity, yet freshness and drive in perfect measure. Exceptional. **18**

TS: Lovely toasty aromas overlaying deliciously rich, extremely elegant, yeast-complexed fruit. The toasty aromas of post-disgorgement aging might be the reason it stands out, but the core quality is such that the class shines through. **19**

Laurent-Perrier Brut (12% ABV) - 17.5

EA: Medium-deep lemon-gold color. Subdued, ripe nose of apple and earthy minerality. Intense and full on the velvety palate, with a stylish mousse. Long, fruity, and compact. **17**

ME: Straw-yellow, fine mousse. Attractive aromatic medley of orchard and hedgerow fruits (deft blending). Fine, tingly mouthfeel from a mousse that is both racy and creamy. Very good balance of flavors. **17**

TS: Lovely, juicy-fruity yet elegantly yeast-complexed. Delightful, refreshing, and rewarding. **18.5**



***Taittinger Prélude Brut Grands Crus (12% ABV) - 17.5**

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Complex toasty nose, with gunpowder, lemon, peach, and fudge. Fleishy and smooth on the nicely flowing palate. Medium-long and easily approachable. **18.5**

ME: Fine, complex, rich yet uplifted bouquet of a very fine blend—maybe (both) Pinot-dominated. Nice freshness and acidity on the palate, obviating heaviness. Class. **17+**

TS: Lovely, soft, fluffy mousse, gently supporting rich yeast-complexed fruit. Good, but lacks focus and finesse. **16.5**

***Angel Brut (12.5% ABV) - 17**

EA: Deep, lemon-green color. Deep nose of gunpowder, smoke, lime, and confectionary. Fresh and vibrant palate, with bright fruit and a focused structure. Fine, soft mousse. Long, fruity, and mouthwatering. **18**

ME: This has richness and a silky, satiny texture on both nose and palate. A bespoke, “made” wine but very good of its type, with some class yet with street appeal. **16.5**

TS: Scottish trifle fruit, creamy-sweet, lifted by a nice, firm mousse of tiny bubbles. **16**

Gosset Excellence Brut (12% ABV) - 17

EA: Pale lemon color. Smoky and toasty nose, with lemon and spices. Linear, crisp, and focused on the dry palate. Good but not great. **16**

ME: A good, ripe, subtly toasty character pervades this wine, making it a fine partner for sauced great fish—sea bass, the rare short-season Atlantic *maigre*, and turbot. **16.5**

TS: Rich, creamy peaches and custard fruit over a lovely pincushion mousse. Elegant, fresh. **18**

Pannier Sélection Extra Vieillessement Brut (12% ABV) - 17

EA: Medium-deep lemon-green color. Soft and youthful pear-and-floral nose. Nice intensity and mouthwatering acidity on the palate. Firm, structured, and fine. Long, fruity, and fresh. **17**

ME: Rounded, balanced flavors in a well-conceived Non-Vintage blend. **15**

TS: This cuvée has finesse from the start; immediately recognized on the nose, pervading the yeast-complexed fruit and extending the impressively long finish. **18.5**



Philipponnat Royale Réserve Brut (12% ABV) - 17

EA: Deep lemon-gold color. Soft nose of caramelized sugar, yellow apple, and lemon. Voluptuous, rich palate, with creamy mousse. Stylish, linear, and firm palate, with vivacity and sufficient length. **17.5**

ME: Evolved nose, with notes of toast. Some vinous complexity. **16**

TS: This has real finesse on both nose and palate, which are gently rich and yeast-complexed, with floral-vanilla undertones. **17**



***Pol Roger Extra Cuvée de Réserve (12.5% ABV) - 17**

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Stylish, fine-tuned nose with gentle autolytic yeastiness. Smooth and velvety on the seamlessly flowing palate. Deep, sweet fruitiness and some residual sugar noticeable on the finish. Long and intense. **17**

ME: Detectable mild richness and maturity on the nose; finesse, too; fine balance, svelte, elegant, but with well-realized, precise flavors. Fine Champagne. **17**

TS: Intriguing citrus-laden bouquet, ultra-soft, ultra-smooth mousse supporting a palate that follows through from the nose in character but somehow misses the finesse and the focus. **17**

Pommery Brut Royal (12.5% ABV) - 17

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Soft, sweet apricot nose. Fine, creamy mousse. Crisp, lively, and intense enough. Rounding sweetness at the finish. Easy to drink, with charm. **17**

ME: Rich, ripe, quite complex aromas; lovely balance of opulence, energy, and dynamism on the palate. A fine NV for all seasons. **17**

TS: Very good entry-level; easy-drinking, satisfying, with just enough autolysis to complex the fruit, elevating the wine above simple fruit-driven style. **16.5**



Louis Roederer Brut Premier (12% ABV) - 17

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Soft, round nose of lemon, candied fruit, and mineral touches. Full, voluptuous, and polished, with a soft, creamy mousse. Long, intense, and fresh. **17**

ME: Lightish straw gold; good mature (maybe Pinot-ish) fruit dominant; a nice check of freshness and minerality. Still quite tight; should blossom further. **15.5**

TS: A deliciously fine, elegantly rich, yeast-complexed Champagne of much finesse. Satisfying and beguiling. **18.5**

Vilmart Grande Réserve Brut Premier Cru (12.5% ABV) - 17

EA: Pale lemon color. Fresh, restrained, pear-and-smoke nose. Fresh, linear, and lightweight on the palate. Elegant, with nice fruit purity. **17**

ME: Simple, direct, pure. Rather pretty. **16**

TS: Lovely soft mousse supporting fine, yeast-complexed fruit and a creamy-textured finish. **17.5**

***Armand de Brignac Brut (12.5% ABV) - 16.5**

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Soft, evolving nose of vanilla and gunpowder. Firm and powerful on the palate. Linear and focused, with fine mousse. Long and fruity. **18**

ME: Pinot-ish, vivid yellow color; plenty of flavor; rich, very ripe black fruit. Vinous, more on flavor than finesse, but generous all the same. **16**

TS: Excellent fruit structure and mousse, some yeast complexity. **15**

***Canard-Duchêne Cuvée Léonie Brut (12% ABV) - 16.5**

EA: Pale lemon color. Restrained, mineral nose of gunpowder and white flower. Pure and fresh. Silky palate with a linear structure. Elegant and refined. Fine fruit quality. **17.5**

ME: The aromas have a bright polished sheen—“made” wine, in a good way. Attractive entry of flowers *au nez*, poised rich fruit without loss of precision; sprightly mouthfeel with zip and energy, supporting richness of fine Champagne. Excellent, bordering on exceptional. **17.5**

TS: Fresh, vanilla-dusted fruit, but somewhat simplistic, lacking finesse in both the fruit and the mousse. **14.5**

Delamotte Brut (12% ABV) - 16.5

EA: Medium-deep lemon-straw color. Soft and rich nose of vanilla, dried fruit, and toasty complexity underneath. Full and voluptuous mouthfeel, with lemony acidic backbone. Dry finish. **16**

ME: Attractive compote, rather than fresh fruit. I quite like this slightly larded character—very good, I would imagine, with Asian cuisine flavors, where a spicy “sweet” edge works well. **16.5**

TS: Fresh and juicy, finishing with the sweetness of ripe fruit. Lovely. **17**

***Gosset Grande Réserve (12% ABV) - 16.5**

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Creamy and soft nose of pastry and ripe peach. More loose on the palate, lacking tension. Medium-long and fresh finish. **16.5**

ME: An elegant fine-drawn expression. Superior, delicate, and rich; subtlety the keynote. **17**

TS: Okay, taste it, move on. Nothing negative, but nothing stands out. **16**

Lanson Black Label Brut (12.5%) - 16.5

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Soft, overt nose with a nice mix of flowers, citrusy notes, and gunpowder. Lemony fresh on the palate, which is dry but fruity and linear. Pure fruit and lovely intensity. Very fine and elegant. **18**

ME: Straw gold; fine, bright mousse; variegated nose of some complexity, fruit, spice, and a burgeoning complexity; mouthfeel is still tight, but there’s a core of flavor and refined *matière* (if that’s not a contradiction in terms) on the mid-palate. Should go higher. **16**

TS: Distinctive, spiced-fruit aroma, rich-ripe fruit, plenty of acid, and a lovely soft mousse. **16**



Moët & Chandon Impérial Brut (12% ABV) - 16.5

EA: Deep lemon-gold color. Fresh, complex nose of lemon, gunpowder, herbs, and earthy notes. Firm and lively but lacks expression on the palate. Fine mousse and medium length. **15.5**

ME: Good solid Champagne with a lime/*agrumes* character that is pleasing. Good with food. **16**

TS: It’s a tribute to the richness of this wine that the very high acids do dominate. Drink now or in four or five years’ time. **17.5**

Palmer Brut Réserve (12% ABV) - 16.5

EA: Medium-deep lemon-green color. Stylishly toasty and layered nose, with white

flower, lime, and perfume aromas. Linear and vivacious on the crisp and long, pure palate. Refined and light. **17**

ME: Slightly more maturity to this cuvée, though less natural character than [Joseph Perrier Cuvée Royal Brut]. **15.5**

TS: Mouthwateringly fresh, cool, juicy fruit. Nothing complex, but a joy to drink. **17.5**

***Laurent-Perrier Grand Siècle Grande Cuvée (12% ABV) - 16.5**

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Overt, creamy, slightly too lactic nose of toffee, pencil shavings, and vanilla. Smooth and silky, very gentle effervescence making the wine feel easygoing. Medium-long and ready to drink. **17.5**

ME: *No note or score (last wine; didn’t taste).*

TS: Soft, almost goopy, and perhaps too mellow. **15**



Piper-Heidsieck Brut (12% ABV) - 16.5

EA: Pale lemon color. Mild, soft, and delicate floral nose. A foamy mousse and a lightweight, fresh, and fruity palate. Very youthful and straightforward but enjoyable. **16.5**

ME: Good lime/*agrumes* character—almost Riesling-like. **15.5**

TS: Exceptionally rich, yeast-complexed fruit for a Non-Vintage. Full yet lifted by acids. Satisfying. **17.5**

***Piper-Heidsieck Florens Louis 16.5**

EA: Medium-deep lemon-yellow color. Subdued, delicate white-fruit nose, with flowers and soft breadly complexity. Juicy and vibrant, linear yet easygoing. Long, pure, refined finish. **18**

ME: More overt presence on nose but with a sharpish, bordering-on-coarse acidity on the palate; tastes quite young and with a conventional *dosage* for what is supposedly an expensive Champagne. **14**

TS: Loved the mousse, so silky, and fine crisp fruit on the palate, but needs more post-

“Lovely toasty aromas overlaying deliciously rich, extremely elegant, yeast-complexed fruit. The toasty aromas of post-disgorgement aging might be the reason it stands out, but the core quality is such that the class shines through”—Tom Stevenson on Charles Heidsieck Brut Réserve

disgorgement aging to bring depth to the fruit and complexity to the aromas. 17

Taittinger Brut Réserve (12% ABV) - 16.5

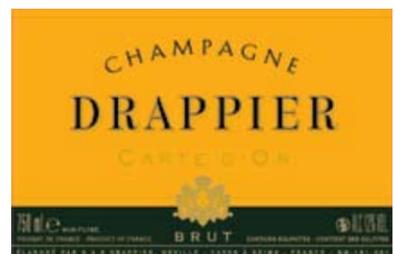
EA: Medium-deep lemon-straw color. Stylish red-fruit nose, with gentle toasty complexity. Mouthwatering and juicy with easygoing, clean fruitiness. Nicely structured and medium-long. 16.5
ME: Sweet, ripe fruity nose; quite punchy and pointed acidity on the nose—youthful cuvée—needs more post-disgorgement aging but should turn out well. 16
TS: Serious Non-Vintage, with bags of yeast-complexed fruit, beautifully dosaged to provide a true Brut that will still age gracefully. 17

Louis Barthélémy Brut Améthyste (12% ABV) - 16

EA: Medium-deep yellow color, with a peach tinge. Soft and round, developing nose of vanilla, apple, and bread. Full and intense on the mouthwateringly fresh palate. Quite long but straightforward. 14.5
ME: Very much in the same green-fruit character as many—perhaps lacking a little expression. 15
TS: Lovely soft mousse; excellent yeast-complexed fruit. Great finesse. 18.5

D de Devaux Brut (12% ABV) - 16

EA: Pale lemon color. Overt, soapy nose, with lemon and chemical notes. Better on the palate. Foamy mousse, lightweight and fresh. 13
ME: An interesting tangy, pithy personality. Evolving pleasurable citron flavors. Good uplifting but elegant acidity. Length of flavor. 16
TS: Brilliant, satisfying, yeast-complexed fruit. Surprising quality for a Non-Vintage. 18.5



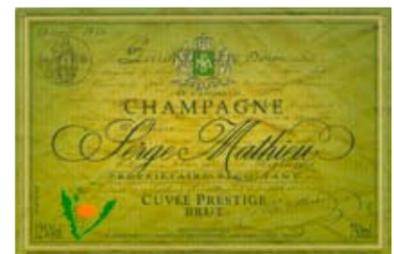
Drappier Carte d'Or Brut (12% ABV) - 16

EA: Medium-deep lemon-green color. Fresh and elegant nose of floral and citric aromas. Crisp, linear palate, with a dry medium-length. 15.5
ME: Same style as [Drappier Carte d'Or

Brut], perhaps with more dynamic zip. 15.5
TS: The mousse is as soft as moss, the fruit is elegant and dominating, but not yeast-complexed. Excellent base but needs more time on yeast, thus later releases will get better and better. 16.5

Henri Giraud Esprit de Giraud Brut (12% ABV) - 16

EA: Medium-deep peach-hued color. Spicy, earthy nose of bruised apple. Firm, fresh with nice intensity and acidic spice. Medium-long, dry finish. 15.5
ME: More black grapes again. Rich, filling fruit—broad and satisfying, with depth. 16
TS: Esterification dominates on the nose, but the palate is quite composed with soft, creamy, yeast-complexed fruit and a medium-long finish. 16.5



Serge Mathieu Cuvée Prestige Brut (12% ABV) - 16

EA: Medium-deep lemon-gold color. Soft nose of ripe red apple, vanilla, and pastry. Full and round chewy palate that could have more life and freshness to it. Medium-long drying finish. 14.5
ME: Black grapes-dominated, in a broad palate-filling style. Nice golden fruit in a Marne Valley way. Pleasure. 15.5
TS: Lovely, rich, yeast-complexed, vanilla-dusted fruit. 17.5

De Saint Gall Premier Cru Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut (12.5% ABV) - 16

EA: Pale lemon-green color. Elegant, lemony nose, with white flowers, yellow apple, and mineral complexity. Very dry and linear on the focused palate. Stylish, tight, and compact. 17
ME: Lustrous, green-tinged hue, fine cordon of elegant bubbles; some richness of aroma (from fully ripe grapes); fine creamy texture yet fresh, with good attack balanced by good *gras* harmony—much more than okay. 16.5
TS: Light, fresh, easy-drinking apéritif style, with good Chardonnay fruit and medium length. 15



Lanson Extra Age Brut (12.5% ABV) - 16

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Youthful, floral nose, with straw and honey. Fresh but simple and short finish. Slightly hollow and austere on the palate. Pure fruit and a light, elegant style. 16
ME: Pretty, compact, and quite classy wine, not hugely complex, but with enough élan and precision to give pleasure. 16.5
TS: A nice, mellow Champagne, but not outstanding. 15.5



Thienot Brut (12.5% ABV) - 16

EA: Medium-deep lemon-green color. Fresh, mineral, and smoky nose, with toast and restrained fruitiness. Juicy and crisp on the linear palate. More expression on the palate. Long, intense, dry, and tight. 16.5
ME: This has a fresh, ripe, vital character; seductive nose of spring flowers—lilac and snowdrops—flowing supple character to mouthfeel. 16.5
TS: Terpene-like aromas; soft but weak mousse. 14.5

Tsarine Champagne Chanoine Cuvée Premium (12% ABV) - 16

EA: Medium-deep lemon-gold color. Rich, evolving nose of Viennoiserie and candied fruit. Developed and softened on the palate, too. Lacking some fruit and intensity, though. 16.5
ME: Very natural and a wine of integrity, but quite young-tasting. 15.5
TS: A firm mousse; youthful fruit. Needs more post-disgorgement aging. 15.5

Billecart-Salmon Brut Réserve (12% ABV) - 15.5

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Ripe floral nose, with even some overripe characters. Pungent palate lacking refinement. Medium length and a drying finish. 14.5
ME: Freshness, light citrusy character aromas; sprightly and dancing on the palate, racy and incisive. Racy but ripe. Well made. 16
TS: Creamy, yeast-complexed Chardonnay fruit currently dominating. Should improve with 6-12 months' additional aging. 16.5

Canard-Duchêne Authentic Brut (12% ABV) - 15.5

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Soft, evolving apple nose, with a lemony twist. Juicy and fruit-driven palate with a long fresh finish. 15
ME: Straw/Welsh gold, swirling, *très fine* mousse; richness, maturity, and freshness in fine balance, hint of spring meadows; palate confirms an excellent wine of exemplary balance and all the qualities one could wish for. 17.5
TS: Fresh, juicy fruity. Good but a bit short and lacking on the finish. 14

Paul Déthune Grand Cru Brut (12.5% ABV) - 15.5

EA: Pale lemon color. Mild white-fruit nose of pear and flowers. Fresh, straightforward palate, with a firm structure and medium length. Nothing wrong here, but it is very youthful and is missing depth and character. 15.5
ME: Rich, expansive fruit on the nose; good weight and positive structure; good purity and integrity. 15.5
TS: The mousse is a bit explosive, but the vanilla-dusted fruit on the palate shines through. 16

Deutz Brut Classic (12% ABV) - 15.5

EA: Pale lemon color. Fresh, youthful nose of pear and grape. Although soft and simple, this is pleasant on the lightweight, elegant palate. Medium length, straightforward but enjoyable. 15.5
ME: Seemingly Chardonnay-dominated, with that lime Riesling character that one associates with Clare Valley (Australia), of all places. 15.5
TS: Light, bright, very fresh and elegant, but would benefit from 12-24 months' additional post-disgorgement aging. 16

ESSI AVELLAN'S VERDICT

Before we started, we were informed that our Non-Vintage selection would include some of the posh and pricy "bling bling" Non-Vintage prestige cuvées. Comparing NV Champagnes against each other regardless of their price and commercial status (basic Non-Vintage, special Non-Vintage cuvée, or prestige cuvée) is perhaps not fair, but at least it made for one fascinating tasting. Would the cuvées that cost five to ten times more than most stand out? For the sake of these prestige cuvées, I was quite happy to see I gave Armand de Brignac and Angel 18 points and Laurent-Perrier Grand Siècle 17.5—satisfactory scores for all of them. Needless to say, though, there is no recommending the first two for their value for money; rather, only for their show-off value.

All in all, it is about time the Champenois corrected this categorizing confusion. Non-Vintage is a negative

Top wines

- Charles Heidsieck Brut Réserve 19
- Taittinger Prélude Brut Grands Crus 18.5
- Angel Brut 18
- Armand de Brignac Brut 18
- Lanson Black Label Brut 18
- Larmandier-Bernier Tradition Premier Cru 18
- Piper-Heidsieck Florens Louis 18

name. A much better alternative would be the already much-utilized term "Multi-Vintage." The prestige cuvées, with Vintage or Multi-Vintage status, should clearly stand apart.

My top wine, Charles Heidsieck Brut Réserve, was no surprise, since this is the wine I would rank number one of the basic Non-Vintages by reputation, too. Other fantastic top performers were Taittinger Prélude Brut Grands Crus and Piper-Heidsieck Florens-Louis. Happy surprises were Lanson Black Label (18) and Canard-Duchêne Cuvée Léonie (17). I rated a number of grower Champagnes a respectable 17 or more: Larmandier-Bernier Tradition Premier Cru (18), René Geoffroy Expression Premier Cru (17.5), and Benoît Lahaye Brut Nature (17).

Overall, the quality was highly satisfactory. I consider 14 points for a basic Non-Vintage to be minimum performance, and there were not too many wines that did not make it.

- Canard-Duchêne Cuvée Léonie Brut 17.5
- René Geoffroy Expression Premier Cru Brut 17.5
- Laurent-Perrier Grand Siècle Grande Cuvée 17.5
- Philipponnat Royale Réserve Brut 17.5

René Geoffroy Expression Premier Cru Brut (12% ABV) - 15.5

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Mild, elegant, floral and creamy nose. Fresh, straightforward but bright and crisp palate. Linear, with an energetic mousse; interesting tension. 17.5
ME: Expressive, green, cool-country fruits; clean and precise. 14.5
TS: A very voluminous mousse supporting intense yeast-complexed fruit. Could be very good but lacks finesse. 15

Pierre Gimonnet Cuis 1er Cru Brut Blanc de Blancs (12.5% ABV) - 15.5

EA: Pale lemon color. Overt, sweet floral nose, with candied fruit and confectionary. Dry on the lightly hollow palate, which is lean and lacking character. Misses vivacity and joyfulness. 14
ME: Pale hue, limpid, good, small persistent mousse; gentle soft fruit, helped along by judicious *dosage*; energetic, dynamic, minerality and freshness tempered by a gentleness of texture. This I could put in the fridge and drink every day. 17
TS: Slightly amylic aroma (should blow over). Fine, crisp palate; should improve over the next 6-12 months. 15.5

Gonet Roy Soleil Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Brut (12% ABV) - 15.5

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Ripe yellow-apple nose, apple jam, and candied fruit. Very dry, juicy, and lemony. Slightly unpleasant aftertaste. Simple but fresh and appetizing. 15
ME: Pale limpid yellow, hint of green; bright; quite svelte, manicured aromas but little sense of terroir (a "made" wine, in a good sense); well-balanced palate, with freshness and fruit to the fore. Tastes as if on the upper edge of Extra Brut. 15.5
TS: A nice, delicate blanc de blancs supported by a soft mousse, fine acids, and a good, long, crisp finish. 16.5



Alfred Gratien Brut (12.5% ABV) - 15.5

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Stylish, layered nose of gentle toast, gunpowder,

“Stylish red-fruit nose, with gentle toasty complexity. Mouthwatering and juicy with easygoing, clean fruitiness. Nicely structured and medium-long”—Essi Avellan on Taittinger Brut Réserve

and flowers. Very crisp palate, linear and focused. Pure fruit and nice intensity. 17
ME: Ripe but poised fruit on the nose, not blowsy; good drive and kinetic energy, fleet of foot; pretty and focused on the palate; good to very good. 16
TS: High acids, soft mousse, lacking substance and finesse between. 14

André Jacquart Le Mesnil Blanc de Blancs (12.5% ABV) - 15.5

EA: Medium-deep lemon-green color. Stylish, restrained nose with gunpowdery minerality, bright fruit, and subtle toastiness. Rich on the creamy palate. Long and harmonious, velvety finish. 16.5
ME: A Champagne with a certain presence and weight; aromas need to work themselves out—at the moment with a whiff of leesy ferments (which is probably better than it sounds). Quite enticing lime and *agrumes* character to palate. Would score higher but for the leesiness. 16
TS: Some tropical fruits on the nose, fruit-driven on the palate, but rather one-dimensional, leaving the acids high and dry on the aftertaste. 14.5

André Jacquart Vertus 1er Cru Blanc de Blancs (12.5% ABV) - 15.5

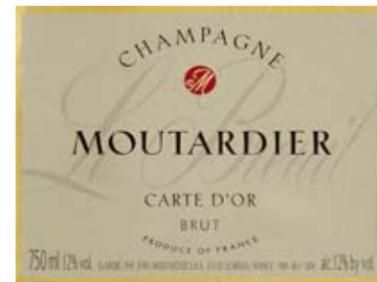
EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Pronounced, soft, creamy nose, with ripe peach, vanilla, and fudge. Pungent on the palate, showing coarseness and a drying finish. Foamy mousse and a voluptuous mouthfeel. Long, concentrated finish, with oak characters becoming dominant when evolving in the glass. 14.5
ME: Light, bright, green-tinted yellow; persistent mousse; fine medley of honest aromas, fresh, incisive, fruity, and mineral; ripe but refreshingly dry in the mouth, palate-filling yet athletic. Very good. 16.5
TS: Creamy malolactic (not too dominant) high-acid Chardonnay, with the barest oxidative hint. Great length, but it's all acid at the moment, though this should fill out as the creaminess of the malolactic merges with post-disgorgement aromas over the next 12-24 months. 15.5



***Serge Mathieu Tête de Cuvée Sélection Brut (12% ABV) - 15.5**

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Overt, volatile nose of red fruit and glue. Full and round palate; easygoing. 14.5
ME: Lots of energy and dynamism, but young and really not that complex for an expensive Champagne. 15

TS: First bottle: oxidized. Second bottle: Fresh, clean, very rich fruit. 17



Moutardier Carte d'Or Brut (12% ABV) - 15.5

EA: Pale lemon color. Restrained nose of baked apple and spice. Slightly austere on the palate. Fresh and firm but not very charming. 14.5
ME: Seeming to move to more black-grapes presence. Fine interplay of orchard stone fruits—peach and plum—with a hint of caramel. Fresh yet full on the palate, a fine classy *assemblage* of flavors. Excellent. 17
TS: Sweetish, but from a *dosage* point of view not overdone. Good now, but I would keep 12 months. 15



GH Mumm Brut (12% ABV) - 15.5

EA: Pale lemon green. Mild, even muted nose of gunpowder and lemon. Very fresh and energetic on the clean, pure palate. Not hugely complex but fruit-forward and pleasant. 15
ME: Pale yellow, limpid; round, *gras*, opulent; gentle rather than sprightly or energetic. 15.5
TS: Fresh, juicy-fruity and satisfying, without any significant complexity, but it works extremely well at the level for which it was made. 16

Joseph Perrier Cuvée Royal Brut (12% ABV) - 15.5

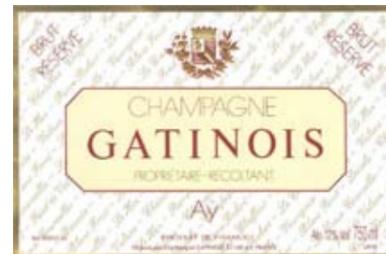
EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Stylish, fruity nose, with citric and toasty complexity. Linear fresh palate with medium length. Elegant and pleasant but not very intense or complex. 15.5
ME: Quite youthful; green tints to the hue; nice mousse. Green-fruit character, almost as far as gooseberry (nose); citronelle, candied-lemon tones give appeal to the palate. In good poised shape. 16
TS: Fresh, chewy juicy fruit. This is a bit one-dimensional but is enjoyable at entry level. 14.5

***Taittinger Folies de la Marquetterie Brut (12.5% ABV) - 15.5**

EA: Medium-deep lemon-yellow color. Stylish, subdued, but layered nose of toasty, mineral, and sweet fruity nuances. Fine, creamy mousse. Firm and lively but not much depth nor the complexity promised on the nose. 17
ME: Quite simple and direct. Doesn't taste as if it should be in an elevated level. 13.5
TS: Full, rich, and characterful, with a firm mousse and a vanilla-dusted finish. 16

Chartogne-Taillet Ste-Anne Brut (12% ABV) - 15

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Deep nose with some complexity. Apple, vanilla, and toffee. Full and round on the palate. Voluptuous fruit, velvety and fresh. 16.5
ME: In the same style as [Marie-Noëlle Ledru Grand Cru Brut]. 14.5
TS: Fine, okay, and I suspect it hits all the chemical-analysis spots, but this is nothing outstanding. 14



Gatinois Brut Réserve Grand Cru (12% ABV) - 15

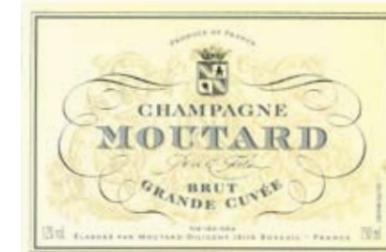
EA: Pale peach-hued color. Overt, youthful, red-fruit nose. Straightforward, with no autolysis complexity. Pure fruit and nice; round mouthfeel, though. Simple and cheerful but lacks proper Champagne complexity. 14
ME: Pinot-ish or Meunier tint to color; palate-filling, leafy fruits, generosity of Marne Valley. Very attractive and forward flavors. Lots of charm. 17
TS: A bit rustic; lacks finesse. 14



Benoît Lahaye Brut Nature (12% ABV) - 15

EA: Medium-deep yellow color, with a peach tinge. Open and overt, soft ripe apple, candied fruit, and pastry nose. Clean fruitiness, round mouthfeel, with

crisp acidic backbone. Dry finish but not too dry. Pleasant, soft mousse. Not very complex, but bright and fruity. 17
ME: Not completely star-bright, rather disordered cordon; smells as if it has a small *dosage* that is not entirely integrated in the wine; odd "sweet" edge to mouthfeel masking what fruit there is. So-so. 13
TS: Clean and fresh, high acids, and a fine mousse of tiny bubbles, but tight on the palate (rather than austere), needing a little time to develop; however, with no *dosage*, I would be wary of keeping this wine too long. 14.5



Moutard Grande Cuvée Brut (12% ABV) - 15

EA: Pale, lemon-green color. Youthful, grapey, and floral nose. Loose mousse and a short length. Clean, fresh fruitiness but no layers or depth. 13.5
ME: Fresh, citronelle character again. A touch monotone. 14.5
TS: The esterification and autolysis are intermingling, making the fruit fine and fresh yet intriguingly yeast-complexed. 17



Bruno Paillard Première Cuvée Brut (12% ABV) - 15

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Rich, evolving nose of caramelized sugar, red apple, and lemon. Firm, fresh palate, with medium length. Oxidizes in the glass quickly. 15.5
ME: Quite a broad rustic style, but it doesn't lack flavor. 15
TS: Lovely soft mousse, but the palate lacks a touch of definition. 15



Ployez-Jacquemart Passion Extra Brut (12% ABV) - 15

EA: Pale lemon color. Fragrant nose of lemon, peach, smoke, and cream. Fruity and easygoing silky palate. Lacks some structure, but the finish is fresh and long. 15.5
ME: Pale yellow, with green lights; maybe a slight trace of *dosage* but less intrusive than [Benoît Lahaye Brut Nature]; attractive rounded mouthfeel. No asperity—this is a simple Champagne, pleasurable and of street appeal. 14.5
TS: Very fruit-forward style, with a big enough whack of sulfur to allow a little aging, which is ironic, because it does not really need to develop. 15

Pouillon Cuvée de Réserve (12% ABV) - 15

EA: Pale lemon color. Soft nose, with lactic characters and vegetal and floral nuances. Modest in intensity on the palate. Simple, lacking all autolytic characters. 13
ME: Clean, straight purity of fruit here; lime, lemon, maybe grapefruit. Upright, elegant, pretty. Does not lose interest, even if you bought a case. 16.5
TS: Sweetish fruit; soft mousse. 15

De Venoge Cordon Bleu Sélection Brut (12% ABV) - 15

EA: Deep lemon-gold color. Soft, evolving, vanilla nose, with caramelized fruit. Fruity and round, with medium-bodied palate. Easygoing and pleasurable but not much depth. 14
ME: Good maturity on the nose, hints of honey and benign oxygenation. Really quite fruity, almost *surmature*. How much finesse? 15
TS: Oxidative aromas degrade a delightful wine with a super-soft mousse. 16

Veuve Clicquot Brut (12% ABV) - 15

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Soft, charred nose, with smoke and white fruit. Powerfully charred on the palate, too. Peculiar. Soft and a bit loose-textured. The smoky aromas overwhelm at the finish. 13.5

ME: A fine example of a deftly blended Non-Vintage cuvée: mature grapes transformed into a pleasing balance of fruitiness and expanding vinosity. Harmony is the name of the game. 17
TS: Floral autolytic aromas, but the fruit has a strange creamy-smoky character. Absolutely no faults here, so quite possibly a phase. If this was in my cellar, I would look at it every three months to see how it develops. 15



Barnaut Grande Réserve Grand Cru Brut (12.5% ABV) - 14.5

EA: Medium-deep lemon yellow. Expressive nose of toast and gunpowder. Vivacious palate, with crisp acidity and nice long, fresh length. Very nice but could do with more depth. 17
ME: Rich, vinous, with preserved balance. 16
TS: Very slight VA lift to the fruit, not noticeable to most, who will only detect the fruitiness. Firm mousse. Lacks finesse. 11

***Canard-Duchêne Charles VII Brut (12% ABV) - 14.5**

EA: Medium-deep yellow color. Full and overt, stylish nose, with toast, earthiness, toffee, and red apple. Round and smooth on the crisp palate. Nice depth and texture but not much elegance. 16.5
ME: Still primary fruit; rich and full but not that much complexity—as yet. 15
TS: Sweetish, rather simple fruit; cloying aftertaste. Lacks finesse. 12



Marie-Noëlle Ledru Grand Cru Brut (12% ABV) - 14.5

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Overt nose of oxidizing apple and dried fruit. Chewy and round on the juicy palate. One-dimensional, with oxidative characters. 14.5

“A fine example: mature grapes transformed into a pleasing balance of fruitiness and expanding vinosity. Harmony is the name of the game”—Michael Edwards on Veuve Clicquot Brut

ME: Sweet and ripe—street appeal. 14.5
TS: Pure acacia autolysis on the nose (this is very much time-dependent, so probably it will have disappeared by publication, unless a freshly disgorged shipment has been released); fine yeast-complexed fruit on the palate, but lacks the finesse factor. 14.5



Maily Grand Cru Brut Réserve (12% ABV) - 14.5

EA: Medium-deep yellow color. Youthful, floral, and grapey nose, with no autolytic characters. Soft and fluffy, lacking intensity and spine. 14
ME: Black fruits to the fore. Substance, presence on the palate. A good barbecue Champagne. 15.5
TS: A tad estery, particularly amylic, but other esters, too, suggesting that this

Champagne had not hit its first window of disgorgement opportunity, which is confirmed by the rather simple palate and finish, although it is not short. The length signifies that this could be quite impressive if given longer on yeast. 14.5

Gonet-Médeville Tradition Premier Cru Brut (12.5% ABV) - 14

EA: Pale lemon color, with a peach tinge. Overt, fruity nose of red apple and earthy spiciness. Fresh and crisp, even a touch tart on the medium-bodied palate. Firm and medium-long. 16.5
ME: Much more sprightly and alive; good "sweet" fruit and fine balance. 16
TS: Not enough substance for its acidity. 10

Larmandier-Bernier Tradition Premier Cru (12.5% ABV) - 14

EA: Pale lemon-green color. Fresh and soft nose, with cream, lemon, and gentle toastiness. Fresh and energetic, nicely focused palate. Pure fruit at the medium-long finish. Elegant and appetizing. 18
ME: Quite diffuse, the qualities and character all jumbled together. 14
TS: Very rustic, high acids but VA noticeable. Lacks finesse. 10

Pehu Simonet Selection Grand Cru Brut (12.5% ABV) - 14

EA: Deep lemon color. Soft nose of baked apple, confectionary, and caramelized fruits. Fluffy mousse and slightly hollow palate. Fresh but quite short. 14.5
ME: More vinosity and interest. Well above average. 15.5
TS: Firm mousse, with nothing of any elegance underneath. 12

Perrier-Jouët Grand Brut (12% ABV) - 14

EA: Deep lemon-gold color. Overt, soft, toffee nose, toast and dried fruit. Full, soft, and round palate lacking some vivacity. Medium-long, evolved palate. Should not be cellared for too long. 14.5
ME: A primary fruit, slighter bigger character but not lacking in balance. Citronelle lacquered-lemon dominant. 15
TS: There is a lot to like about this soft, fluffy Champagne, but there is also a niggling hint that it is about to fall apart. 13

Bollinger Special Cuvée (12% ABV) - 13.5

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Soft, ripe nose of apricot and honey. Medium-bodied with good intensity, but lacks refinement. 14
ME: A more lemon-sherbet, charming fruit profile, and none the worse for that. 16
TS: Slightly oxidative fruit, sumptuous mousse, bitterness on aftertaste. 10



Doyard Cuvée Vendémiaire Brut - 13.5

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Pronounced, soft, lactic nose, with charred toastiness and vanilla. Some signs of oxidation. Very creamy lactic on the palate, too, lacking vivacity and freshness. 14
ME: Quite rich yet balanced; a good core of flavor. Good length. 16
TS: Spoiled by caramel malolactic aromas that end a bit eggy. 10

René Geoffroy Brut Premier Cru Empreinte (12% ABV) - 13.5

EA: Medium-deep yellow color. Soft and mild, ripe white-fruit nose. A touch of volatility. Round and fleshy on the palate. Loose mousse and short finish. 14.5
ME: Pretty, leafy, and clean. Nothing to dislike here. 15.5
TS: The combination of acidity and firm mousse is too aggressive. 11

Philipponnat Royale Réserve Brut Zero (12% ABV) - 13.5

EA: Medium-deep lemon color. Ripe fruity nose of apple and baking spices. Firm and fresh but slightly tart on the citric finish.

"Make no mistake, there is great minerality here and a very, very fine mousse indeed. An underrated Champagne if ever there was one!"
—Tom Stevenson on Duval-Leroy Fleur de Champagne

Medium-long, simple, and slightly austere, dry finish. 14
ME: Pale straw, green rim; very dry, compact nose, more mineral than fruity, slightly flat; opens up on the palate—commendable purity and balance; very dry, of course, but not acerbic, with good balance of fruit and minerality. Energetic, with good persistence. 16.5
TS: Oxidative, thin in fruit; dry, unforgiving finish. 10

Jacquesson Cuvée 735 Brut (12% ABV) - 13

EA: Deep lemon color. Soft, toffee nose, with floral notes. Fluffy mousse and a hollow palate lacking spine and intensity. Medium-long, slightly unpleasant finish. 13.5
ME: Touch of caramel on the nose, and a "sweetly" rich character on the palate. Quite a lot of people will like this, but it's not my favorite style. 15
TS: Sour-cream aroma; fruit contrastingly fresh and facile. 10

Gaston Chiquet Tradition Brut Premier Cru (12.5% ABV) - 12.5

EA: Medium-deep lemon-green color. Smoky-mineral reduced nose. Vanilla and toffee come through on the palate. Slightly unfresh finish. 13
ME: Touch of surmaturité on the nose—not unpleasant, even if a sniff of the confectioner's shop. 15
TS: Sour-cream and yogurt aromas dominate the nose and permeate the palate. 10



Ployez-Jacquemart Brut (12% ABV) - 12.5

EA: Medium-deep lemon-gold color. Pronounced, lifted nose of red fruit and chemical tones. Full, round, and powerful but not very refined. Short, drying finish. 12
ME: Ripe; beginning of secondary maturing flavors; good harmony, purity, and balance. 16
TS: Lifted Pinot fruit; acetic finish. Drink on purchase. 10

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



Duval-Leroy Fleur de Champagne - 18

ME: A more delicate green hue than the Duval-Leroy Brut, with pale gold lights. As its names implies, all white flowers on the nose. A dancing presence on the tongue, Chardonnay flavors dominant, quite forward and fine-drawn, expressive of stylish and athletic Côte des Blancs and Montagne grapes of high quality. Fine relief, rapier-like definition and length. Excellent. A versatile wine for a variety of seafood, especially crustaceans. 17
TS: Refreshing, crunchy redcurrant and raspberry fruit from the minority Pinot Noir, which is currently dominating and intermingling with the crisp citrus Chardonnay fruit. Make no mistake, there is great minerality here and a very, very fine mousse indeed. An underrated Champagne if ever there was one! 18.5

Duval-Leroy Brut - 15

ME: Bright, fresh, elegant, pastel yellow suggests slightly raised Pinot element vis-à-vis the majority Chardonnay; ripe, orchard-fruit aromas, primary but rounded; attractive, well-balanced citrus and yellow-fruit flavors—fresh. Zippy and direct, with racy acidity that is not aggressive. A very good NV for all occasions and light meals. 16
TS: Crisp and fresh, with absolutely no flaws, although to be picky, there are some green-fruit aromas, but at least they are distinctive elements in what is otherwise merely a workhorse Non-Vintage. For most people, this Champagne does its job but no more than that. However, for anyone remotely interested in Champagne, the only option would be to pay the 10 percent premium demanded for Duval-Leroy's Fleur de Champagne Premier Cru, which is in a completely different class. 14

Henriot Brut Souverain - 16

ME: Fresh yellow, quite resonating color, with that quite assertive, pointu Henriot nose; a broader palate than the Henriot Blanc de Blancs, even perhaps a touch of tannin. Not my preferred style, lacking a little grace and elegance. 15
TS: Good bottle age, yet extremely fresh, with rich and succulent fruit supported by a fine mousse. 17



Henriot Blanc de Blancs - 18

ME: A more sustained green-gold than the Brut Souverain; a quite assertive nose of character, serré; grip and substance on the palate, very mineral, very northern Côte des Blancs, in the Henriot tradition. Also excellent, in a different style from the Duval-Leroy. A wine for sauced lobster, providing a contrasting foil. 17
TS: Deliciously intense richness of fruit, so pure and fresh. Stunning! 19

Ruinart Blanc de Blancs - 11

ME: Light yellow permeated with pale green. An active, dynamic mousse. On the nose, quite rounded and full, suggesting additional sources of Chardonnay to the Côte des Blancs, with slightly earthy tones. A noted impact of punchy acidity in the mouth, not entirely integrated—a youngish cuvée of agrumes flavors more than lemony citrus. Fresh finish. A tad disappointing for the house. 15
TS: I had to do a double take when tasting this, since it was such a huge disappointment after the beautifully focused and precise cuvée that was available one year ago. If tasted blind, I would wonder whether this Champagne was spoiled by some rot from the 2005 or 2007 harvest. What a pity! 7

The following wine was corked: Fluteau Cuvée Réserve

MICHAEL EDWARDS'S VERDICT

My heart sinks a little when faced with the task of tasting of 70 Champagnes en masse. After 30 sparklers, my mouth begins to taste like the inside of a washing machine. But today, such was the meticulous condition and perfect temperature of the wines, in an ideal tasting room, that I managed to keep concentration and focus at this marathon.

The fine quality of the mousse throughout made a big difference, allowing the mouthfeel of most Champagnes to remain fresh and well defined. The quality of the selection helped immeasurably, of course. This was an excellent tasting by any standard, more than a few grandes maisons and bijou vigneron strutting their stuff in a deft display of the art of the cuvée—either in trans-regional blends or in the more terroir-based wines of growers' locales.

Top wines

- Charles Heidsieck Brut Réserve 18
Canard-Duchêne Authentic Brut 17.5
Canard-Duchêne Cuvée Léonie Brut 17.5
Gatinois Brut Réserve Grand Cru 17
Gosset Grande Réserve 17
Laurent-Perrier Brut 17

My scores say it all. One Champagne, Charles Heidsieck Brut Réserve (18), was outstanding for its succulence and balance; 21 wines reached an exceptional 17/17.5, and 24 made 16/16.5—a fine result. It's encouraging to see familiar big names, some with a checked past, showing well, particularly Pommery Brut Royale and the improving Mumm Cordon Rouge; Canard-Duchêne Cuvée Léonie was a particular delight. Blue chips like Billecart and Pol Roger did all one would expect. Grower Champagnes were sometimes surprising and variable. Benoît Lahaye's Brut Nature I liked less than his excellent Brut Essentiel (not here): a moderate dosage of 6g/l suits his style better, maybe? The celebrity cuvées performed creditably enough but are of questionable value for money. Wouldn't you rather have the lovely Clos du Moulin at a fraction of the price of Armand de Brignac—both from Cattier?

- Moutardier Carte d'Or Brut 17
Pierre Gimonet Cuis 1er Cru Brut, Blanc de Blancs 17
Pol Roger Extra Cuvée de Réserve 17
Pommery Brut Royal 17
Taittinger Prélude Brut Grands Crus 17
Veuve Clicquot Brut 17