

# REVIEW

## Blanc de blancs sans année

Tom Stevenson identifies what makes for great Non-Vintage blanc de blancs and tastes through a broad range of wines from houses and growers to see how they measure up



All photography by Jon Wyand, from Michael Edwards, *The Finest Wines of Champagne* (Fine Wine Editions / Aurum and University of California Press, 2009)

**C**hardonnay is responsible for Champagne's longest-lived wines, so why bother to make a Non-Vintage blanc de blancs? Twenty years ago, this was a simple question to answer for houses in general and for Côte des Blancs growers in particular, even if they gave two different replies. For the houses, it was, and indeed it still is, a means to an end: the ability to produce a cuvée that could be sold at a premium over the basic Non-Vintage, thereby funding a higher budget for a stricter selection of higher-quality components for the *assemblage*. Not the expense of a true Vintage-quality Champagne, perhaps, but certainly a step up in price. For Côte des Blancs growers, however, a blanc de blancs Non-Vintage would simply be their basic Non-Vintage because their vineyards were, and often still are, exclusively planted with Chardonnay. Furthermore, 20 years ago, their Non-Vintage was also their Vintage, separated only by time. While it was too young to be sold as a Vintage (which requires a minimum age of three years), it was sold *sans année*—literally “without year”—and remained that grower's Non-Vintage until the following year's production became ready to be sold. It would then be left on its lees until the preceding Vintage cuvée (which at one time had also been sold *sans année*) ran out, when it would be disgorged and labeled with the appropriate vintage.

This was common practice. Now it is not. A new generation of growers has started to explore its own roots, producing a wider range of cuvées, often expressing individual terroirs. Growers are now producing a much wider range of Champagnes, both Vintage and Non-Vintage, so it is a much more level playing field, since we are not necessarily comparing a basic grower Non-Vintage cuvée against

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a premium product from the houses.

All this, however, makes the original question even more legitimate: Why bother to make a Non-Vintage blanc de blancs? Non-Vintage Champagne is supposedly ready to drink, whatever its style might be, whereas although Vintage Champagne might be ready to drink when sold, it should always offer the customer the potential to mature gracefully when properly cellared. So the question boils down to, How do you make a Non-Vintage cuvée composed exclusively from Chardonnay, the grape that takes longer than any other in Champagne to evolve in bottle, ready to drink in a relatively short time? The answer is obvious, yet it is an answer that appears to have eluded many producers, both houses and growers: Use more reserves than you would for a Non-

Vintage blend. If Daniel Thibault, the legendary *chef de cave* at Charles Heidsieck, were alive today and had been tasked with just such a project, I can just imagine the wonderful, silky-smooth, creamy delight he might have produced.

There is another tweak that might also be worth trying, and that would be to produce a Non-Vintage blanc de blancs with a pressure of just 4 atmospheres, rather than 6. Chardonnay does tend to produce a firm, fierce, even aggressive mousse in its youth. This can be tamed with longer post-disgorgement aging prior to shipment, but in the Non-Vintage category this is even harder to achieve than it is for Vintage Champagne, so a more *crémant* style would be a very effective compromise.

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**TASTING**

**Henriot Blanc de Blancs** (12% ABV)

One third of the way through these blanc de blancs, and this lightly mellow, toasty number is far and away a class apart from what has gone before. And as it turned out, there was only one wine after this of a similar quality. Seductive. | **18.5**

**Lanson Extra Age Brut Blanc de Blancs** (12.5% ABV)

Classic blanc de blancs with a little biscuity age heightening the interest and a lovely soft mousse. More restrained than the Henriot, but that only adds to its finesse. Will continue to improve. | **18.5**

**Cattier Brut Blanc de Blancs Signature** (12.5% ABV)

Richer and more stylish than Cattier's Blanc de Blancs Premier Cru, this is really quite delicious in a nicely understated way. | **18**

**Billecart-Salmon Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru** (12% ABV)

Classy, understated, but ultimately fulfilling, youthful Chardonnay fruit, this beautiful Champagne has obvious class and the ability to age. Great minerality. Drink or keep 2-3 years. | **18**

**Ulysse Collin Les Perrières Lot No.09 SOL EX Extra Brut** (12.5% ABV)

Although the oak dominates, it is nice oak, and it is nice oak that suits the effervescence of Champagne, enabling the richness of this blanc de blancs to retain its finesse. Excellent. | **17.5**

**Ruinart Brut Blanc de Blancs** (12.5% ABV)

Light, fresh, elegant fruit supported by a classic mousse and growing finesse. | **17.5**

**Mumm de Cramant Grand Cru Brut Blanc de Blancs** (12% ABV)

Lovely toasty notes, with light and delicate fruit; more of a joy to drink now than one to keep. | **16.5**

**Pascal Doquet Premiers Crus de la Côte des Blancs Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut** (12.5% ABV)

Fresh and light, this fairly skips across the palate, making it the perfect apéritif. | **16.5**

**Bérèche Les Beaux Regards Brut Nature** (12% ABV)

[2007-based, disgorged October 2010.] Very slightly oxidative, extremely dry, austere, very crisp, long acidic finish. Very good but would be much greater if it had no aldehydic aromas. | **16**

**Bérèche Les Beaux Regards Brut Nature** (12% ABV)

[2008-based, disgorged November 2011.] Very slightly oxidative, really quite dry, but interestingly not as austere as the 2007-based cuvée, even though 2007 was a less acidic year. | **16**

**Claude Cazals Cuvée Vive Grand Cru Extra Brut** (12% ABV)

Another slightly oxidative wine but softer and a tad more mellow than most of that style. | **16**

**Bruno Paillard Blanc de Blancs Réserve Privée** (12% ABV)

Round, mellow Chardonnay fruit; excellent acidity. This is a blanc de blancs that could age well. | **16**

**Gaston Chiquet Blanc de Blancs d'Aÿ Grand Cru** (12.5% ABV)

Easy-drinking, satisfying, creamy Chardonnay fruit—a delight to drink. | **16**

**Pommery Summertime Brut Blanc de Blancs** (12.5% ABV)

A light, fresh, easy-drinking style that could gain gravitas from 12 more months of bottle age. | **16**

**Delamotte Blanc de Blancs** (12% ABV)

The mousse is a bit strong for the delicate Chardonnay fruit underneath, but there is a lovely creamy finish, promising dividends with more post-disgorgement aging. Keep 2-3 years. | **15.5**

**Bonnaire Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs** (12% ABV)

So fresh and floral, but with an amylic touch. Although easy, light drinking now, it should be kept 9-15 months to lose the amylic aromas. | **15.5**

**Claude Cazals Carte d'Or Grand Cru Brut** (12% ABV)

A bit amylic, but clean and fresh with a creamy aftertaste. Should improve. | **15.5**

**Cattier Brut Blanc de Blancs Premier Cru** (12.5% ABV)

Light, gentle, somewhat straightforward almond-lemony fruit. | **15**

**Gosset Grand Blanc de Blancs** (12% ABV)

Softly infused oxidative hay aromas. Nice, but would be better with less aldehydic aromas. | **15**

**Le Mesnil Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru** (12% ABV)

Another "could do better" wine, but no oxidative or aldehydic aromas: should simply have had more post-disgorgement aging for a softer mousse. | **15**

**Franck Bonville Cuvée Prestige** (12.5% ABV)

Straightforward, good depth of fruit, mellowing nicely toward the end. | **15**

**Doyard Cuvée Vendémiaire Brut Blanc de Blancs** (12.5% ABV)

Straw and hay-like aroma detract, but good fruit, deftly supported by a pincushion mousse. | **15**

**JL Vergnon Eloquence Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Extra Brut** (12% ABV)

High acids, but low, watery flavors. | **14.5**

**Pierre Péters La Perle LSNV** (12% ABV)

Very young, very fresh, amylic aromas that might blow away with more time in bottle, but the fruit on the palate is somewhat staid. | **14.5**

**Franck Bonville Belles Voyes** (12.5% ABV)

Very slightly *maderisé*, which detracts from the freshness and finesse. | **14.5**

**Lenoble Les Aventures Grand Cru** (12% ABV)

Has depth but is a bit flabby and tired. | **14.5**

**Bérèche Les Beaux Regards Brut Blanc de Blancs** (12% ABV)

A bit oxidative, which detracts from the finesse, but a good depth of flavor and intensity. | **14.5**

**Jean Milan Spécial Brut Blanc de Blancs** (12% ABV)

Weak and watery. | **14.5**

**Charles and Alfrède Prieur Grand Prieur Brut Blanc de Blancs** (12% ABV)

Powerful but lacks finesse and elegance. | **14.5**

**Paul Goerg Brut Blanc de Blancs** (12% ABV)

Creamy fruit, good mousse, but lacks finesse. | **14.5**

**Pascal Doquet Grand Cru Le Mesnil-sur-Oger Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut** (12.5% ABV)

Nicely dry, but lacks the intensity, grace, and minerality expected from Mesnil. | **14.5**

**Bérèche Côte 62 Mois de Cave Premier Cru Extra Brut** (12.5% ABV)

Oxidative, due to its method, not its age. | **14**

**Ulysse Collin Les Perrières Lot No.08 SOL EX Extra Brut** (12.5% ABV)

Straw, hay, and a touch of rubber, with hay dominating the finish. | **14**