

VINTAGE BLANC DE BLANCS CHAMPAGNE A WHITER SHADE OF PALE

Tom Stevenson asks what makes a great blanc de blancs and, after sharing an extensive tasting of Vintage wines from 1982 to 2009 with **Michael Edwards** and **Andrew Jefford**, concludes with them that greatness comes in many guises—from precocious wines with “an attractive elegance of linear fruit,” to mature splendors with “the gravitas and richness of Corton-Charlemagne”

In *Casino Royale* (Ian Fleming, 1953) James Bond considers ordering a Taittinger 1945, but the sommelier suggests Taittinger Blanc de Blanc [sic] 1943, and Bond approves, remarking that it is “not very well known” but “probably the finest Champagne in the world.”

With these words, Fleming put the chic back into Champagne when sales were hitting rock bottom just after World War II. In fact, demand had dropped to such a low level that the size of the AOC region had to be officially reduced in 1951 to avoid surplus production.

Fleming was thus a pioneer of product placement, and through *Casino Royale* he became the first person to promote blanc de blancs, a style that was hardly known outside of the Champagne region itself at the time. His British secret agent, Commander James Bond, was partial to other Champagnes, such as Bollinger and Dom Pérignon, and was supposedly a connoisseur of all fine wines, but it was the Taittinger that stood out in his first novel. He made blanc de blancs Champagne exciting and glamorous for a new generation of consumers in the postwar austerity of the early 1950s. Although fewer than 5,000 copies of the

first edition of *Casino Royale* were printed, Fleming’s novels became such bestsellers after the first Bond film, *Dr. No*, was released in 1962 that he had sold more than 40 million copies by the time of his death in 1966. It was this commercial clout that brought the blanc de blancs style to the attention of a wider, aspiring public in the ‘60s.

Origins

As a style of Champagne, cuvées composed exclusively of white grapes have probably been produced since the first sparkling wines from this region became commercially available in the mid-18th century. They must surely have been in existence when Henry Vizetelly wrote *A History of Champagne* in 1882, though it is by no means conclusive. Writing about Cramant, Vizetelly points out, “From the vineyards around this picturesque little village, and extending along the somewhat precipitous Côte de Saran [...] there is vintaged a wine from white grapes especially remarkable for lightness and delicacy and the richness of its bouquet [...]—but he does not actually indicate whether it exists as a pure product, as he continues, “an admixture of which is essential to every first-class champagne cuvée.”

The earliest definitive mention I have found so far dates back to 1934, when an intrepid English wine buyer by the name of Charles Walter Berry observed that blanc de blancs “is not often sold under firm names, but under the village or commune name, called Blanc de Blancs of Cramant, or Avize, or Mesnil.” Although he enjoyed these “delightful wines,” Berry noted that they “do not travel well” and were available only locally. However, although Berry was clearly referring to sparkling Champagne, even at this juncture the term blanc de blancs was most usually reserved for still wines. As Didier Gimonet of Champagne Pierre Gimonet told me, “My grandfather sold a Côte des Roualles Blanc de Blancs from the 1934 vintage, but it was a still wine. We did not label Champagne as blanc de blancs until 1947.”

What about Champagne Salon? I suppose my book *Champagne* (Sotheby’s Publications, 1986) is guilty of creating or at least perpetuating the myth that Salon was the world’s first blanc de blancs Champagne. It was and still is made solely from Chardonnay grapes, but there never was any mention of the term blanc de blancs on Salon until the thrice-fermented version of the 1971 vintage was released

in the early 1980s, well after the fashion for blanc de blancs had been established and the use of that term had appeared on thousands of labels.

If the proliferation of the term blanc de blancs in the ‘60s was caused by anyone, it was Bond, not Salon, and 007’s endorsement coincided with the launch of two of the greatest blanc de blancs ever: Taittinger’s Comtes de Champagne (first vintage 1952) and Dom Ruinart (first vintage 1959). The reputation and, not least, high prices achieved by these two early deluxe cuvées added a certain gravitas to the Chardonnay grape, which until then had been overshadowed by Pinot Noir. This led to the planting of Côte de Sézanne almost entirely with Chardonnay in the mid-1960s, and as the demand still managed to outstrip supply, so Chardonnay vines were allowed to creep eastward from the bottom of the great slopes of the Côte des Blancs on to the far more modest plains and—sin of all sins—on the wrong side of the D9.

What makes a great blanc de blancs?

Literally “white of whites,” a blanc de blancs is simply a white wine produced from white grapes, and although ubiquitous throughout the

world of wine, this term only makes real sense for Champagne, the majority of which has traditionally been made from a large proportion of black grapes. Until 1980, there was no legal definition of a blanc de blancs Champagne, and it could therefore be made from any or all of the white grapes permitted for Champagne, which included not only Chardonnay, but also Pinot Blanc, Petit Meslier, and Arbanne. The last two varieties are pretty obscure, ancient varieties that were historically planted in small volumes in the Aube, but most of those vines were removed long ago, when the primary grape variety switched from Gamay to Pinot Noir. Very small amounts of both varieties still exist, however, having been initially revived by Jacquesson for Petit Meslier and by Moutard for Arbanne. These old varieties have made something of a comeback among the younger generation of Champenois, who are seeking their roots. In 1980, a blanc de blancs Champagne was legally defined as 100 percent Chardonnay, but since the umbrella appellation encompassing AOCs changed from VQPRD to AOP, this has quietly been dropped and thus a blanc de blancs Champagne can be produced from all permitted white Champagne varieties. The fact of the



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AVERAGE AND RANGE OF SCORES

	Average	Range
Tasting		10.5-20
ME	15.5	13.5-18
AJ	14.5	10.5-18.5
TS	16	12-20

matter is, though, that despite the three ancient varieties having enjoyed a minor revival of late, they still represent less than half of one percent of all the vines planted; consequently, consumers can assume all blanc de blancs Champagnes will be pure Chardonnay unless specified to the contrary on the label (front or back).

Most of the best blanc de blancs are produced from grapes grown exclusively in one or more of the Côte des Blancs villages, and of these Le Mesnil-sur-Oger has consistently proved superior in terms of potential longevity and complexity, while Cramant is capable of expressing the greatest finesse. Fabulous blanc de blancs can, however, be made outside the Côte des Blancs. For example, almost half of a typical Dom Ruinart blend comes from Chardonnay grown on the northern Montagne de Reims at Sillery and Verzy, and Palmer is famous among the cognoscenti for its blanc de blancs from Trépaill and Villers-Marmery on the eastern Montagne de Reims. Everyone knows that the Montagne de Reims is classic Pinot Noir country, but the greatest Pinot Noir vineyards are found in two pairs of neighboring villages: Verzy and Verzenay on the northern Montagne, and Bouzy and Ambonnay on the southern Montagne. However, as you drive from Verzy and Ambonnay, look closely at how the vines are trained, and you will see that you have moved away from the cordon style of the Pinot Noir to the Chablis style, because almost all the vines between those two villages are planted with Chardonnay—close to 500ha (1,235 acres) in total. The style is very different from that of the Côte des Blancs, neither better nor worse, and very special when blended with about 20 percent Sézannais Chardonnay in magnums of the best vintages from Palmer. With 1,135ha (2,800 acres), the Sézannais boasts the second-largest concentration of Chardonnay vineyards in Champagne and contains some very good growers, but it has in my estimation performed best when used as part of a blend. The hilly area of Mont Berru to the east of Reims is planted entirely with Chardonnay. You can clearly see it if you look north from any of the villages on the northern Montagne de Reims, but it has so far

shown significantly less potential than the Sézannais, although Pol Roger sources some of its grapes from here. Another lesser-known area where Pol Roger sources Chardonnay grapes is Grauves, technically part of the Côte des Blancs but separated from the contiguous vineyards on the famed eastern slopes by the boar-infested forest Bois d'Avize. Grauves might not have sexy ring of the grands crus such as Avize or Oger, let alone Mesnil or Cramant, but anyone who has tasted the 1928 pure Grauves reserve wine at Pol Roger, which is unbelievably pale, with flecks of green glittering in its reflection, will never doubt the potential of this relatively modest premier cru.

How it ages

Blanc de blancs is often portrayed as the lightest of Champagnes. Some are, particularly in their youth, but they should not all be consigned to the apéritif bin, since the very best stand out for their elegance, focus, and seemingly weightless length. Linearity is the hallmark of a fine blanc de blancs, but Chardonnay also happens to be the longest-lived of Champagne's grapes—thus, with sufficient cellaring, some of the greatest blanc de blancs can achieve the gravitas and richness of a Corton-Charlemagne.

Typically, a classic blanc de blancs can start off so tight, reserved, and austere that it may appear to be lacking in fruit in its youth, or it could have just a light and very simple fruit of green apple or watermelon. However, if you notice a minerality, even the hint of minerality lurking beneath the fruit, then it will be worth aging for at least a few years. With just 24 months extra bottle age, such blanc de blancs swell out with lovely, crisp, zippy-zingy fruit—citrus, white and yellow stone fruits—and blossom with citrus and floral aromatics. The next stage will see the development of those citrus fruits as they gain intensity, while the white and yellow stone fruits can give way to really juicy peachiness and sometimes even tropical fruit. Given sufficient age, most blanc de blancs develop a toasty richness, while the best will mellow into biscuity-creamy richness, gradually acquiring complex aromas of honey, hazelnuts, walnuts, or Brazil nuts.

Later still, they may achieve intense but slow-building flavors of coffee, chocolate, and macaroons on the finish. Many blanc de blancs, however, are more precocious, showing more immediate appeal and possessing an attractive elegance of linear fruit in abundance at an early stage.

The tasting

Michael Edwards had a plane to catch and was unable to taste all of the Champagnes, which was a great pity, since he missed a number of truly great Champagnes here, and I do not use that term lightly. This was a fabulous tasting, and it is on occasions like this that I owe it to the readers to be very clear-cut about which wines stood out and which of those definitely shone better than others—even to the point of giving the most outstanding wine 20 points, if necessary, and to hell with whatever others might think about the use or validity of the so-called perfect score. In fact, for me, awarding a score of 18.5 is actually harder than awarding a score of 20!

As soon as I saw the crib sheet, I was very happy with my scoring. A score of 18.5 is a big statement. It might not seem like it when I managed to find 11 blanc de blancs worthy of 18.5 points, but when scoring, not just Champagne, but any style of wine, I find the step up from 18 to 18.5 significantly harder than any other half-point increment on the scale. It probably stems from 18.5 being the threshold for a gold medal in most of the competitions I have judged in. This gold medal concept does not conflict with *WFW*'s 20-point scale, even though *WFW* has a separate top tier for 19–20. When judging, I tend to think of 19 as “solid gold” and 19.5–20 as “super-gold,” with any wines achieving such stratospheric scores probably ending up as trophy winners in my estimation.

When I give 18.5 points, it means that a wine is not just a great wine, it is also showing great at the time of tasting. For 18.5 points, a wine has to sing, as Clive Coates MW would say. We are supposed to be judging the quality on the day, not trying to see the future, so if a great wine is holding back, it does not make that step from 18 to 18.5, as far as I am concerned. The 2002 Dom Ruinart, for example, to which I gave

18 points: At the time of the tasting, that was about right, but six months earlier I had been berating Fred Panaiotis, the *chef de cave* at Ruinart, about how dismal the 2002 was showing; yet now, as this issue goes to press, it has moved on and up, to the point that it has just been awarded the World Champion Deluxe Blanc de Blancs trophy (see pp.40–47). Chardonnay has such impressive potential longevity that it is inevitable that many of the Champagnes in the tasting have yet to reach their peak. I can easily imagine that a number of other wines to which I awarded 17, 17.5, or 18 points could, like the 2002 Dom Ruinart, achieve a higher score in the future.

So, I make no apologies for finding as many as 11 blanc de blancs that are worthy of 18.5 points. After all, at the prices these Champagnes demand, there should be at least that many great wines out of the 76 we tasted, and it is the expensive ones that fail to amaze us with their quality that we should be worried about. And there were plenty of disappointments. Some shockers, too. When we tasted the Perrier-Jouët Belle Epoque Blanc de Blancs 2000 and 2002, for example, I wondered if clear glass could be the problem and wondered why there were no back-up samples. I was not surprised, however, when I discovered their identities on the crib sheet. I was not surprised, but I was very sad all the same, because these wines in perfect condition are superb examples of graceful evolution. So, yet again I feel compelled to warn everyone (rather than merely advising them) to keep any Champagne in a clear bottle not just in a cool and totally dark place, but in its box.

How these blanc de blancs fared

Ayala has always been one of Champagne's best-value brands, and over the past eight or nine years it has also been one of its fastest improving. The 2007 Blanc de Blancs must rank as one of its finest Champagnes to date. I must confess that I expected nothing less than outstanding blanc de blancs from Alfred Gratien, Lanson, Delamotte, Dom Ruinart, and Charles Heidsieck, and they did not let me down, but it was good to see Bonville, Charlemagne, Chartogne-Taillet, and

Lenoble standing shoulder to shoulder with such great and famous names. These small, mostly grower Champagnes have often been prone to overtly aldehydic aromas, but I have always highly rated their Champagnes when they manage to avoid this; some of these producers have been working hard to produce a less oxidative style, and as these cuvées demonstrate, it is paying off. The soft and sumptuous 2000 Pol Roger and the multi-award-winning Taittinger Comtes de Champagne 2005 have been two of the most consistent blanc de blancs on the market for a while, so it is no surprise to me that they stood out with a 19-point score. Then along came the 2002 Palmer. I was not impressed by the 2007 in 75cl bottle, but I have tasted it in magnum and promise you that it will be special. When you buy any vintage of Palmer Blanc de Blancs, you really should buy it in magnums and not drink it before it is ten years old. The magnum effect on the 2002 provided such finesse that I simply had to give another half-point difference. So, what else could I do when something as magical as the 2000 Krug Clos du Mesnil came along? Well, having already given a score of 19.5, the only possibility of communicating that another Champagne stood out further was to give it a score of 20 and, with another 20 Champagnes to taste, pray that nothing even more impressive turns up later. That is why it is much easier for me to score 20 than 18.5; and that is why it does not matter when someone blathers on about there being no such thing as a perfect wine. That is their problem, not mine. I'm just using the top score, not making any declaration of philosophical importance. Critics may accuse me of scoring too high in the first place, but my answer would be that every one of the 11 Champagnes that scored 18.5 points deserved 18.5 points. Giving them anything less would be wrong.

All three tasters have overlap wines among their top-scoring blanc de blancs, but I have not attended any *WFW* tasting where these individual lists have proved to be so crucial. If any readers like the aldehydic style or think that Champagne should be halfway to Tokaji, then they should ignore my recommendations completely.

THIS WAS A FABULOUS TASTING. SO I MAKE NO APOLOGIES FOR FINDING AS MANY AS 11 BLANC DE BLANCS THAT ARE WORTHY OF 18.5 POINTS. AFTER ALL, AT THE PRICES THESE CHAMPAGNES DEMAND, THERE SHOULD BE AT LEAST THAT MANY GREAT WINES OUT OF THE 76 WE TASTED, AND IT IS THE EXPENSIVE ONES THAT FAIL TO AMAZE US WITH THEIR QUALITY THAT WE SHOULD BE WORRIED ABOUT

TOM STEVENSON'S TOP WINES

Krug Clos du Mesnil 2000	20
Palmer & Co Blanc de Blancs 2002 (magnum)	19.5
Pol Roger Blanc de Blancs 2002	19
Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs 2005	19
Ayala Blanc de Blancs 2007	18.5
Franck Bonville Blanc de Blancs 2008	18.5
Deutz Blanc de Blancs 2007	18.5
Guy Charlemagne Mesnilissime Grand Cru 2004	18.5
Chartogne-Taillet Heurtebises 2008	18.5
Delamotte Blanc de Blancs 2004	18.5
Alfred Gratien Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru 2007	18.5
Charles Heidsieck Blanc des Millénaires 1995	18.5
Lanson Noble Cuvée de Lanson Blanc de Blancs Brut 1995	18.5
Lenoble Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs 2008	18.5
Dom Ruinart 1996 (magnum)	18.5

Guy Charlemagne Mesnilésimé Grand Cru 2004 (12% ABV) | 18.5

AJ | Mid-gold; gentle mousse. Very attractive aromas, with lots of breadiness over some tangerine and orange citrus: classic and well crafted. The palate is firm, vinous, and long, with splendid intensity; that same winning combination of soft bread dough and citrus peels haunts the aromatic notes palate. Texturally it's full; the ripely green fruits sing out; the *dosage* is well judged and unobtrusive. Excellent blanc de blancs from 2004. An absolutely pure, virtuous example of the style. | 18

TS | Do I detect a little hint of coffee growing here? Rich but beautifully balanced by acidity. Clean and tight, with a focused mid-palate and a fantail on the finish. I like! | 18.5

Charles Heidsieck Blanc des Millénaires 1995 (12% ABV) | 18

ME | Very full: a powerful wine. | 17.5

AJ | Full gold; evanescent mousse. Gentle, honeyed, and full; very calm and settled, but attractive, too. Hints (all hints) of hazelnut shortbread, honeysuckle, fresh peaches, fresh nectarines. Light, long, sweet-finishing, but before the *dosage* closes in there is lots of creamy, graceful yellow summer-fruit richness. Powdered stone to finish, lending a little sobriety. A well-aged blanc de blancs of almost perfect proportions, leaving the mouth fresh, clean, and hoping for more. It would be lovely to see an alternative with a little less *liqueur*. | 18.5

TS | An amazing, mouth-filling experience, incredibly mellowed by the yeast-complexing process. Long, fine. | 18.5

Pol Roger Blanc de Blancs 2002 (12.5% ABV) | 18

AJ | Full yellow-gold; gentle mousse. A rich, fresh fruit mix; admirable lift and primary engagement for a wine almost 14 years old. A touch of butter, but just a touch—cold butter, not melted. On the palate, this is deep, structured, mouth-filling, bright, and poised; the classic green-apple and ivy-leaf flavors are long and vinous. A very firm, large-scaled blanc de blancs that, nonetheless, maintains its poise and chic. The *dosage* is well judged, rounding the palate without fogging it. | 16.5

TS | Beautifully soft and silky mousse, with light notes of toast wafting through gently rich, yeast-complexed fruits. Perfect to drink now but gives the feeling that it is not going down and will continue to age gracefully. | 19

Ayala Blanc de Blancs 2007 (12% ABV) | 17.5

ME | Rich *agrumes* fruits and a real core of flavors; no asperity | 16

AJ | Mid-gold; fine mousse. Full, elegant, sweetly beguiling, coolly creamy, though not finely detailed as yet (give it time). Elegant, fresh, powdery palate, with lots of stony finesse to it. As with some of the other 2007 wines, the acidity is

very prominent yet super-ripe, super-round, very drinker-friendly. Another exceptionally well-made wine with great poise and finesse. The finish is long yet fresh, full of sap and ivy leaf, and there is all the ground-stone complexity that you could want, too. The fruit qualities here are admirably subtle. A few more years should bring greater aromatic detail and nuance. Just slightly taut and acidically firm at the end but that will soften... Outstandingly pure, limpid blanc de blancs from fine vineyards, surely. | 18.5

TS | Beautifully fresh and clean, with lovely yeast-complexed Chardonnay fruit, this is a delight to drink on its own but would also be ideal at the table. | 18.5

Chartogne-Taillet Heurtebises 2008 (12% ABV) | 17.5

ME | This has an abundance of *agrumes*, grapefruit-like fruit, and fills the palate with a fine calcaire minerality. Excellent. | 16.5

AJ | Pale gold; fine, steady mousse. The nose in part reflects the vanilla, which is a component of the varietal Chardonnay spectrum here, but in part the plant sap, ivy leaf, and milled stone, which is pure Champagne class. Excellent work. On the palate, it is long, vinous, structured, pure, and poised—fine raw materials, in sum. This is a blanc de blancs of great finesse and elegance. There are apple-quince fruits but drawn with great restraint; the richness is white almond; the acidity is sap-filled and teasing. I am hugely enthusiastic about this relatively young, shy wine. | 18

TS | Although obviously rich, that classic 2008 acidity brings it ramrod straight and is softened by a gloriously silky mousse. A class act now, this can only get better. | 18.5

Delamotte Blanc de Blancs 2004 (12% ABV) | 17.5

AJ | Pale; sustained mousse. Lots of aromatic architecture here: rich bread dough and brioche, vanilla cream, ripe dessert apples. Vivid and fresh on the palate, with bright, edgy fruit (green apple and green plum), some yeasty complexities, excellent palate aromatics, and a flowery finish. Finely crafted and satisfying. | 16.5

TS | Gorgeous! I just love the fruit, the little toasty notes, the fabulous acidity—everything! | 18.5

Le Mesnil Prestige Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru 2002 (12% ABV) | 17.5

AJ | Mid-gold, with a sustained mousse. Lovely scents: billowing snowy vanilla, a little warmed cream, poised summer fruits. Outstanding aromatic craftsmanship. On the palate, the wine is deep, bready, full, and plump, with a restrained *dosage* and fruits that are now adult and vinous. It's long; it's almost punchy. Perhaps you'd hope for a little more finesse from a blanc de blancs, but the rigor, depth, and truth to place of this wine are outstanding. In terms of concentration, too, this is one of the top two or three wines in the flight. Magnificent work. That drill bit of fruit pushes on right the way through the finish and buzzes with

aromatic force all the way. | 17.5

TS | Peachy Chardonnay fruit with an evolved mix of vanilla, coffee, and toast. | 17

Deutz Blanc de Blancs 1995 (12% ABV) | 17

ME | A more delicate expression than [Lanson Noble Cuvée de Lanson Blanc de Blancs Brut 1995] but still exceptional. | 17

AJ | Pale to mid-gold. A much brighter, fresher wine than many of its peers; still softly and freshly lemony. On the palate, it is lemony, intense, and long, with some powdered-stone complexities to finish. Well-preserved, even athletic, aged blanc de blancs, with a considerable arsenal of charm. I'd love to spend a little time with this wine. | 16.5

TS | Nice, fresh, crisp—but am I missing something? I would try this at the table. | 17.5

Deutz Blanc de Blancs 2007 (12% ABV) | 17

ME | A good wine, with little of the lean asperity that can mark the also-rans of this cold vintage. Generous citrus fruits, a hint of spice, and a well-made Champagne that worked well in a difficult year. | 15.5

AJ | Bright, light gold with languid mousse. Lots of biscuity fullness here; almost a malty note, too. Agreeable and full, but not super-subtle. Vivid, round, fresh, lively, long; fine-quality fruit, well handled; creamy textures; and a finish with plenty of poise and freshness. Outstanding vinification work with good raw materials. So good, indeed, you wonder what else it has to do—and I guess the answer is that there isn't quite the electric nerve, incision, and aromatic profundity of the very greatest blanc de blancs, as well as a slight lack of aromatic finesse. The vintage at work? But in every other respect, this is an outstanding contender. | 16.5

TS | Lovely yeast-complexed Chardonnay fruit lifted by a super-silky mousse, this will get more complex and attain even greater finesse as it ages. | 18.5



Krug Clos du Mesnil 2000 (12.5% ABV) | 17

ME | Bingo! Lovely Champagne of controlled autolysis, secondary vinous flavors, toastiness, vinosity. | 17.5

AJ | Full-gold; gentle mousse. Bread and honeycomb, but a slight chemical note, too. Vividly and trustingly acidic on the palate, with some counterbalancing *dosage*, but not the vinosity or secondary overtones to counterbalance the acidity. An intense blanc de blancs, but beginning to look just a little gaunt now. | 13.5

TS | Immaculately integrated oak and brilliant, yeast-complexed Chardonnay fruit. So focused and so precise. Magical! | 20



Palmer & Co Blanc de Blancs 2002 (magnum) (12% ABV) | 17

AJ | Pale gold (from magnum); fine mousse. Lots of autolytic character here, and perhaps a little underwined beneath, but overall this is a nice thing to smell. Just a little farmy edge to it, which I quite enjoy. Clean, fresh, citric, still young but a little one-dimensional; very apples and lemons in its flavors. | 14

TS | Gorgeously seductive toasty aromas, with mirrored fruit on the palate that is just so complete. Stunning! | 19.5

Dom Ruinart 2002 (12.5% ABV) | 17

AJ | Full glowing gold; languid mousse. Soft, gentle, honeyed, gracious, and almondy; also something a little mossy, earthy, and mushroomy now. On the palate, and rather to my surprise, this is very dry (extra-brut?) and driving, with a relatively austere finish. Piercing and long. There is good aromatic resonance from that lean apple fruit, but its very leanness is still a surprising contrast to aromatic charm. Still some years ahead of it, I'd say. | 15.5

TS | Mellow, toasty aromas floating through toasty fruit with hints of mocha and white chocolate. | 18

Dom Ruinart 1996 (magnum) (12.5% ABV) | 17

ME | Still strong acidity, but the wine is fresh and vibrant, not dying as some are. Best in magnum. | 17.5

AJ | Very full gold. Very rich and elderly, with the classic walnut notes of fully mature Champagne Chardonnay. Gratifying and charming. Lush, full, open, and waxy on the palate, with walnut-butter richness in plenty, vivid acidity, and a very round *dosage*. Indulgent now, but I wouldn't keep this for much longer (and it's in magnum...). | 15.5

TS | As pale as a three-year-old Champagne! Gorgeous! So fine and fresh, so complete and mellow, with gracefully aged, mellow, yet amazingly fresh coffee fruit. | 18.5

Salon Blanc de Blancs Le Mesnil 2002 (12% ABV) | 17

AJ | Full gold; gentle mousse. Unhappy aromatic evolution here: closed and a little chemical/stinky. Disappointing, estery palate. | NS

TS | I cannot be too harsh score-wise because this is, in itself, rather complete, but it is a little bit too mellow, needing a bit of grip and grace to propel it upward. | 17



Franck Bonville Blanc de Blancs 2008 (12.5% ABV) | 16.5

ME | This has real virtue: energetic, mineral, lovely green fruits, greengage, your favorite orchard. Young but the class is evident. | 17

AJ | Pale to mid-gold; a slightly desultory mousse. Slightly coarse Bakelite and washed-linen aromas, though I'm carping; in a noisy wine bar, it would just smell right. On the palate, it's a sound if not electrifying blanc de blancs, with plenty of light, vanilla-laden fruit; decent depth and length; and some vinosity. All fine, in other words, until you take the magnifying glass to it. | 13.5

TS | Rich, energetic, delicious and classy, with a silky-soft mousse. | 18.5

Guy Charlemagne Cuvée Charlemagne Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs Brut 2009 (12.5% ABV) | 16.5

ME | Ripe yellow predominant color; the *gras* ripeness of fruits melds with a decent acidity crispness on nose and palate. Well made. | 16

AJ | Full gold; steady mousse. Broad, clean, attractive; generalized northern orchard fruits: apple, pear, quince. And the palate is exactly what the nose promises. This is never going to be a blanc de blancs to write essays about, but it does its job very cleanly and effectively, and no one will feel short-changed in sipping it. It has elegance; the fruit quality is very sound; it has medium length, vinosity, and sappiness. Simply delicious, in sum. | 16

TS | Lovely, fresh citrus-fruit aromas, very young, but with a gorgeously soft mousse. Drink

now or in 24–36 months for something more evolved. | 17



Gaston Chiquet Blanc de Blancs d'Aÿ Grand Cru 2004 (12.5% ABV) | 16.5

AJ | Full yellow; sustained mousse. Creamy and soft, a slice of peach flesh, a whisper of hazels: that's what you hope for in a glass of blanc de blancs. Lots of *dosage* here, which rather overwhelms the delicate fruit; some stone to finish. A pert, toothsome blanc de blancs, but not profound. | 14.5

TS | Rich and toasty and will get toastier, but has the acidity and structure to take it. | 18

Deutz Amour de Deutz 2005 (12% ABV) | 16.5

ME | The balance of fruit and acids is better more harmonious than in [Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs 2005], but there is little complexity here. | 15.5

AJ | Full gold; gentle, languid mousse. Sappy, fresh, poised aromas of some subtlety: good. Mouth-filling, light, lifted, poised, and graceful. A shapely, aerial, ballerina-like blanc de blancs, which many would surely consider the aesthetic ideal for this style, with prominent acidity carrying the rest of the palate in its train. Sappy and fresh to the last drop. Just a touch grassy, to carp. I slightly miss some richer, stonier elements in the finish, but this is the brisk apéritif style personified. | 16.5

TS | Although the nose is as evolved as one would expect a 2005 to be, the medium-weight, fine, taut, and tense fruit on the palate is waiting to be released. Come back in 12 months! | 17



Pascal Doquet Premier Cru Le Mont Aimé de Blancs Brut 2002 (12.5% ABV) **16.5**

AJ | Pale to mid-gold; delicate mousse. Lots of very well-organized orchard fruit on the aromas of this wine; resonant and mouthwatering. Elegant, long, lean, structured, and taut; quite a pithy, zesty style of blanc de blancs, but the fruit has intrinsic class, and there's depth and vinosity behind. The finish is satisfyingly stony, too. Pungent, long, and challenging. | **16.5**

TS | Spoiled by oxidative notes. | **NS**

Alfred Gratien Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru 2007 (12.5% ABV) **16.5**

ME | A bit lean in terms of acidity and texture, with sweet fruit. So-so. | **14**

AJ | Pale gold; fine mousse. This smells discreet and restrained: no foams or creams at all. In their place, the gentle aromatic presence of limestone masonry at the end of a summer day... which is not dissimilar to a fine, very young premier cru Chassagne. On the palate, the wine is big, rich, ripe, with lots of resonant acidity; well made, pure and elegant. That ripe acidity is very dominant; and then the masonry (pounded to a dust) is back at the end, but I slightly miss a little more middle-palate complexity, a little more sap, and little more energy and vitality. But this is being overcritical, perhaps; this is still outstanding and stylish blanc de blancs, which will get a great drinker response as it tastes so different to a classic Chardonnay/Pinot Noir blend—and is so lovely! | **17**

TS | Succulently citrus Chardonnay fruit and perfectly oaked, very long and smooth, supported by a fluffy mousse. Has finesse. | **18.5**

Lanson Noble Cuvée de Lanson Blanc de Blancs Brut 1995 (12.5% ABV) **16.5**

ME | Lovely, expressive, ripe, and powerful '95—as it should be. | **18**

AJ | Full gold, with a very soft and evanescent mousse now. Aromatically a little tired and cardboardy. Very plump and seemingly richly dosed on the palate. I'm beginning to get the sense that if you want blanc de blancs to age well, you need to be very parsimonious with the *liqueur d'expédition*. Fully evolved, harmonious, but rather candied. | **12.5**

TS | Beautiful coffee-toasty fruit, supported by crisp acids and a fine, pincushion mousse. | **18.5**

Larmandier-Bernier Terre de Vertus Premier Cru Brut Nature Blanc de Blancs 2008 (12.5% ABV) **16.5**

ME | Pale yellow, lively mousse; an intriguing nose, lime, linden—quite dancing and energetic; fine mouthfeel, appetizing, crisp, salivating, a sense of the driving chalk: upright, propelling. A perfect apéritif, from a great young year—on the up. Exceptional. Splendidly digestible. | **18**

AJ | Gold, with a lively seething mousse. Attractive, powdery aromas: a fine snow of milled chalk,

vanilla, and green apple. Understated but come-hither. That vigorous mousse is very apparent on the palate, which puffs and blows when you first sip like a harbor squall, but this is fine-grained, subtly textured *brut nature* blanc de blancs of impeccable balance and finesse, with a splendidly stony finish. The discreet fruit has an inner energy and litheness, too. There isn't the out-and-out beauty of flavor and form for a top score, but this is excellent Champagne nonetheless. After a while in the glass, the mousse settles creamily, too. | **16.5**

TS | Very rich, possibly too rich, but with the 2008 acidity and good pincushion mousse, it just about manages to keep its balance and energy. About as far removed from an apéritif style as anyone could imagine for a *brut nature*. Needs food! | **15**



Lenoble Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs 2008 (12% ABV) **16.5**

ME | Very positive scents and flavors of *agrumes* fruit, edged, with lovely acidity and a deep sense of minerals. | **17**

AJ | Full gold; steady mousse. Lots of sweet pear here, on the nose. The palate is bright, sherbety, tangy, relatively simple; the *dosage* in the wine then gives it a gentle confectionary finish. I get the sense that the raw materials have been stretched here. It's "well made" by folk who know what they are doing, but this isn't a great blanc de blancs of purity and breeding. | **13.5**

TS | Chock-a-block full of autolysis at the time of tasting, with minuscule bubbles, this blanc de blancs is delicious now but will obviously retain its elegance as it ages. | **18.5**

Philipponnat Grand Blanc 2006 (12% ABV) **16.5**

ME | This Champagne speaks sunshine and ripeness; fine, toasty Chardonnay nose, seductive but enhanced by fresh flowing, crisp energy and sense of the chalk. Excellent to exceptional for the vintage. | **17**

AJ | Pale gold with a languid mousse. Lots of mayflower, honey, and pollen here, plus that note that Michael Broadbent MW used to call "fishskin." A blanc de blancs of flowery charm, and very much my kind of thing. On the palate, this is rich, elegant, expressive, and multidimensioned: delicate, very stony fruit, and armfuls of wild hawthorn and other mayblossom flowers laid over it. Poise, finesse, elegance, "minerality": They are all here. Lots of stone in the finish, indeed. Remarkable wine, too, in that it has all of these rich notes present but without ever overwhelming its elemental vitality. Bravo! | **18.5**

TS | Too rich, too heavy. | **14**

Clos Cazals Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut Grand Cru Oger Vieilles Vignes 2002 (12% ABV) **16**

ME | A deeper hue, gold with flecks of bronze; very much into secondary, vanilla-ish ripe orchard fruit aromas; still quite tight palate, everything healthy, no hint of corpulence, needs a little more time. Some substance here. | **16.5**

AJ | Full gold; languid mousse. Generous lemon-butter scents; lush and rich, but not vulgar. Good intensity on the palate, and that generous, downy lemon butter is backed by finely milled stone, so it crosses the palate without leaving any sense of vulgarity, simplicity, or disequilibrium. Not at all Gothic, by contrast, so look elsewhere if that's what you want. But if you prefer a slightly more bosomy blanc de blancs with the vineyard and the soil lurking behind, this is an excellent choice. | **16**

TS | Evolved aromas do not do justice to the smoky-infused fruit on the palate and lovely soft mousse or the lengthy finish. I would give this another 6-12 months before drinking. | **15.5**

Deutz Blanc de Blancs 1988 (12% ABV) **16**

AJ | Mid-gold; evanescent mousse. Gentle scents of autumn fruit, but a slight cardboard hint, too. Sweet, toothsome, and walnutty, reclining on the chaise longue... and lots of fun to drink. Not quite grand or sublime, however; just a little too soft and cuddly for that. Very good blanc de blancs nonetheless. | **15.5**

TS | Overroasted coffee dregs and toast. More interest than seductive. | **16.5**

Diebolt-Vallois Fleur de Passion 2006 (12.5% ABV) **16**

ME | Ripe fruit the dominant impression, and a hint of licorice: maturity. | **15.5**

AJ | Quite deep yellow-gold; steady mousse. Classy though very Burgundian aromas of sliced mushroom, vanilla, and beaten cream. Full, mouth-filling, and turning on a near-Vegas charm, this is another very opulent 2006: broad-beamed, busty, and... not quite blowsy, because it is Champagne after all, but we're almost beginning to flirt with that. There's some ground stone in the finish, but it's less evident in a wine like this than it would be in a *brut nature* or an extra-brut. Nonetheless, you can't fault its exuberance, and it is fun to drink. | **15.5**

TS | Distinctive Chardonnay aromas supported by well-integrated, fine oak. Soft and long. | **17**

Duval-Leroy Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru 2006 (12.5% ABV) **16**

ME | This is the best so far of this flight; tension, energy preserved in a vintage where there can be a lack of it: a very proper Champagne, at once *gourmand* and serious. | **16.5**

AJ | Full yellow-gold; gentle mousse. Pure and fine-grained aromas: subtle and delicate, with mushroom and almond notes but no extravagant

butter. Teasing and beguiling, which is what you hope for from blanc de blancs. Mouth-filling, elegant, and long, with nuanced, fine-drawn fruit, creamy richness, yeasty fullness, and a powdered stone finish, yet the fruit carries all these elements right the way through the central palate without being overwhelmed by them, which is what happens with some of the less successful blanc de blancs. Excellent. | **17.5**

TS | Gently rich, but lacks elegance and has some alcohol showing on finish. | **13.5**

Veuve Fourny Blanc de Blancs de Vertus 2008 (12% ABV) **16**

ME | Slightly softer feel and touch; less mineral, more licorice, a signal of maturity. | **15.5**

AJ | Pale gold; a fine, steady mousse. Nutty, buttery; the "country maid" style of blanc de blancs. Relatively concentrated, with a full frontal, broad-beamed style, but plenty of ground stone beneath. I like this: relaxed and affable, but with some secondary marrow to it; satisfying and sustained. The fruit perfumes the finish, too. Just a hint of sherbet, but not enough to spoil the palate in any way. | **15**

TS | A brilliant balance between high acids, great energy, and finesse of fruit. Can easily be drunk now but will age gracefully over the long term. | **18**

Pierre Gimonnet Oenophile Extra Brut 2008 (12.5% ABV) **16**

ME | Light yellow, ripe hue; citrus and a touch of pear and yellow peach. Sensuous, almost ready, amicable. | **16**

AJ | Pale gold and gentle, steady mousse. Uneventful aromatic profile: fabrics, green plum, perhaps a little honeysuckle. The fruit qualities here are a little tenuous and light, so the *dosage* is evident, but it's not cloying; simple, graceful, pretty enough. A touch sherbety, even. You'd begin to want something a little deeper and sappier after the first glass. | **14**

TS | Very fruity, fresh, and soft. So 2009! Easy to drink now, but will also evolve beautifully. | **18**

Jacquesson Avize Champ Caïn Extra Brut 2004 (12% ABV) **16**

ME | fine, subtle gently evolving Welsh gold; inviting harmonious citrus-scale aromas, open, friendly but elegant, with something in reserve, with admirable tension; palate complete confirmation of nose, lovely balance of now candied lemon fruit, velvet texture and long, quite defined finish. More than excellent. | **18**

AJ | Steady mousse in this pale gold wine. Fresh, light, and powdery as far as it goes; not hugely aromatic. Vinous, full, correct but the fruit is slightly raw and ungenerous. Nonetheless, it's a pleasant glass of blanc de blancs and the gratifying mineral-salt notes qualify the finish. | **13.5**

TS | A lovely balance of freshness and mature fruit, with textbook creaminess more a texture than an aroma. Classically very dry in true extra-brut style. Slightly oxidative within perfectly acceptable bounds. | **16.5**

Lanson Noble Cuvée de Lanson Blanc de Blancs Brut 2000 (12.5% ABV) **16**

ME | Toasty and developed, but still fresh and vital. | **16.5**

AJ | Full gold; sustained mousse. A little gruff and straightforward for a wine of this age. Lively, fresh, frank, and full. Very Chardonnay, too. Satisfying without being seductive. | **14.5**

TS | Fresh, crisp, and clean, with mellow, toasty fruit and fine acidity. | **17**

Joseph Perrier Blanc de Blancs 2006 (12% ABV) **16**

ME | Another fine example of 2006's virtues. Fresh, ripe, expressive fruit, with a paper clip of acidity and a lovely velvet texture in the mouth. Harmony and balance. | **16.5**

AJ | Full yellow-gold, with a steady mousse. Soft pear scents, yet the aromas lack focus and poise. Vivid, exuberant, amply contoured palate, yet the lick of caramelly *dosage* is evident and slightly overwhelms the vitality of the vintage fruit. Attractive but not intricate. | **14**

TS | Lovely balance of fresh aromatics and yeast-complexed fruit on the palate. Has elegance, vigor, and finesse. | **18**

Philipponnat Grand Blanc Brut LV Long Vieillessement 1988 (12% ABV) **16**

AJ | Pale to mid-gold; evanescent mousse. Well preserved alongside some of its peers, though a little bit stiff and raw in character, a little taut and green and austere. Some of the others are almost too evolved, but with this wine's aroma you wonder why it hasn't done more. On the palate, it is green, taut, and tight. Youthful, yes; concentrated, yes; lots of incision, but a slightly green sherbety character and lack of generosity in the final analysis. | **14.5**

TS | So pale with such pure, juicy peach. I cannot understand why this Champagne has not aged, has not even mellowed! | **17.5**

Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs 2005 (12.5% ABV) **16**

ME | Raw, edgy acidity, somewhat out of balance with the ripe fruit of '05. Fair, but no more than that. | **14.5**

AJ | Attractive green-gold; fine mousse. There's almost a slight flunlied reductive quality here; very tight and sappy. The palate, too, almost has a Sauvignon-like, vegetal quality, which suggests shaded canopies. How would the ordinary drinker find this wine? Vital and attractive, but it still reminds me as much of Marlborough as of Le Mesnil. The *dosage* seems very sweet alongside this very green, vital fruit, so for me this wine hasn't yet achieved full harmony. Puzzling but good in its own way. | **14.5**

TS | Very lightly toasty, fine and delicious in the most graceful of ways, with great acidity. This is what finesse is all about. | **19**

MICHAEL EDWARDS'S VERDICT

A fine tasting of Vintage Chardonnay Champagnes, with a good coverage of available years. Of special interest: 2008, young but a great classic, dry vintage in the making; 2006, a charmer for instant pleasure, why we drink Champagne in the first place; 2004, which seems better every time one tastes it, in the best examples challenging the great 2002s for extra precision, focus, and finesse, plus a burgeoning amplexness; 2002 itself, which, owing to pressure of time, I regretfully largely had to miss out on, yet I believe there's no hurry, since the best ones still need time (NB Krug and Billecart yet to release; Bolly RD out this spring).

Delving into the detail, I was delighted to see my 17 and above (exceptional) scores, for wines tasted blind, were among my regular favorites: the 2008 Larmandier-Bernier Terre de Vertus, perfect apéritif, crisp, salivating, a sense of the driving chalk, elegant, propelling; the 2005 Gimonnet Oenophile, silken textured, so utterly different from too many unbalanced wines in this problematic year; the single-vineyard 2004 Jacquesson Champ Caïn, Avize, lovely to the eye, nose, and palate—Welsh gold, admirable tense yet fully ripe scents, a mouthful of candied lemon interwoven with the earthen tastes of this fine *lieu-dit*.

I was glad to cherry-pick from mature vintages, especially in 2000, now *à point*, led by the glorious Krug Clos du Mesnil, a miracle of poised richness in this challenging vintage. Good to see Dom Ruinart as the one of the best '96s, and Lanson Noble Cuvée Blanc de Blancs '95, young, vigorous and delicate, approaching its 20th birthday.

MICHAEL EDWARDS'S TOP WINES

- Jacquesson Avize Champ Caïn Extra Brut 2004 **18**
- Lanson Noble Cuvée de Lanson Blanc de Blancs Brut 1995 **18**
- Larmandier-Bernier Terre de Vertus Premier Cru Brut Nature Blanc de Blancs 2008 **18**
- Krug Clos du Mesnil 2000 **17.5**
- Pierre Gimonnet Oenophile Extra Brut 2005 **17.5**
- Charles Heidsieck Blanc des Millénaires 1995 **17.5**
- Dom Ruinart 1996 (magnum) **17.5**
- Franck Bonville Blanc de Blancs 2008 **17**
- Deutz Blanc de Blancs 1995 **17**
- Duval-Leroy Blanc de Blancs Brut Nature 2002 **17**
- Lenoble Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs 2008 **17**
- Lenoble Cuvée Gentilhomme 2006 **17**
- Philipponnat Grand Blanc 2006 **17**



JL Vergnon Confidence Brut Nature Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru 2008 (12% ABV) | **15.5**

ME | Welsh gold with green lights; rich citrus-fruits nose but also orchard ones like peach; rich, ripe fruit, fine filigreed acidity; good balance, no shiver factor, or asperity. Still tightly wound, with much to give. | **16**

AJ | Pale gold; fine mousse. Sculpted, Gothic aromas: fresh, dry, plant sap. A little sweet vanilla behind, but not particularly beguiling. Searching, austere, pure, dry, very stony and refined; ripeness teased to the threshold, but very little of the way over and in to the house. This works well as a bracing mouthful of the cool north, a Champagne of monastic austerity. Not a crowd-pleaser, though. | **14.5**

TS | Typically pale, very brut, high acids, and a classic lime nose. Fresh and crisp with plenty of energy. Lovely, long, persistent, lemon, lime, and apple fruit on the finish. | **16.5**

Diebolt-Vallois Blanc de Blancs 2006 (12.5% ABV) | **15.5**

ME | Forward, appealing fruit, white Burgundy in style, slight lack of tension and maybe acidity, but attractive. | **15**

AJ | Pale gold; sustained mousse. Very creamy and beguiling scents: mousseline, vanilla, hazels. On the palate, by contrast, this almost tiptoes too far into the rich and the caramelly spectrum; it's lush, Baroque, sweetly rounded, and just a little bit too much, lacking finishing vitality and sap. A super crowd-pleaser, however. | **15**

TS | Seductive creamy-floral aromas, pristine, with a pincushion mousse. | **17**

Champagne Doyard Clos de L'Abbaye Premier Cru Blanc de Blancs Brut 2008 (12% ABV) | **15.5**

AJ | Pale gold; sustained mousse. Fine, powdery scents of considerable finesse and charm: lots of crushed stone; discreet pear and quince fruits; a nascent creamy hazel character, too. On the palate, the wine is slightly richer and more forceful in its expression than the nose suggested, but it's very good, vinous, long, secondary and refined, and a year or two will tone down that exuberance and bring it into perfect equilibrium. Excellent blanc de blancs. | **16.5**

TS | Very rich and fruity. Some VA lifting. | **14.5**

Veuve Fourny Blanc de Blancs de Vertus 2007 (12% ABV) | **15.5**

ME | Similar in style to [Ayala Blanc de Blancs 2007] but less intense. | **15**

AJ | Pale to mid-gold. Yeasty, earthy, malty, even a touch of white chocolate. Very full of the diagnostic '07 ripeness here; plump and round. True to the vintage, to such an extent that it hasn't made the most classical blanc de blancs, but it is a lovely Chardonnay-based Champagne. Good depth, sinew, and finishing vinosity. The fruit is outstandingly high quality. Very good, though drink sooner rather than later. | **16**

TS | A touch oxidative on the nose, but the fruit is clean and reasonably fresh. | **15**



Paul Goerg Premier Cru Blanc de Blancs 2005 Brut (12% ABV) | **15.5**

ME | Similar to [JL Vergnon Résonance Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru 2005]: nice, fresh, balance of minerals, green fruits, and a fresh balance. | **16**

AJ | Pale green-gold, with a very fine, sustained mousse that outlasts its flight peers. This is another 2005 that, like [Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs 2005], has an aroma whose green, vegetal, shaded canopy notes recall New Zealand rather than Champagne; again you might guess it has some Sauvignon in it. On the palate, too, it is quite severely acidic, with some more of that pea-pod greenness. The sweetness of a conventional dosage level just tastes wrong to me, with that green note and that aggressive acidity: very sweet-and-sour. | **12.5**

TS | Exploding with autolysis! Length with finesse! | **17.5**

Lenoble Collection Rare 1982 Brut (12% ABV) | **15.5**

AJ | Full gold; languid mousse. Rather weighty and caramelized nose. Bright, vivid, chunky, and full in the mouth, with a crushed-stone finish; excellent concentration. Still full of life, though I wish the aromatic profile was just a little fresher. | **15.5**

TS | Amazing freshness on the palate for a 32-year-old Champagne, but we are left with only the remnants of what was once a fine wine. | **15**

Artéis & Co Extra Brut Blanc de Blancs 2002 (12% ABV) | **15**

ME | Even yellow, gold lights, hint of green; acidity and dryness on nose; quite a fine-drawn, linear,

and athletic palate; pure; a more reductive style of winemaking—still young-tasting. Honorable. | **16**

AJ | Pale gold; fine mousse. Fresh orchard fruits on a breezy day; lightly lactic, banana hint behind. Soundly constructed, medium-weight palate built around a core of that same apple-and-pear fruit. Not particularly chalky or stony on the finish, and the fruits are more satisfying than exquisite. But it's a workmanlike effort, and I'd happily sip away. | **14**

TS | Rich and tasty, with very fresh fruit for a 12-year-old Champagne. Technically the criticism must be its medium-sized bubbles, but these should get finer with more post-disgorgement aging. I'd love to retaste this disgorgement in 12 or 24 months. | **15.5**



Deutz Blanc de Blancs 1993 (12% ABV) | **15**

AJ | Full yellow-gold; evanescent mousse. Soft, languid, waxy scents. Intense, long, vivid palate combining the waxy fullness of the aromatic profile with relatively sharp-elbowed acidity; the two don't quite come together with classic great-vintage felicity, but this is still a Champagne in good fettle. | **14.5**

TS | Toffee-mellowed fruit. Typical for aging of this vintage now. | **15.5**

Fleury Cépages Blancs Extra Brut 2005 (12.5% ABV) | **15**

ME | Deepish color from a hot late season; aromas rather disjointed, a smack of raw acidity out of balance with *surmature* fruit; big and boisterous on the palate, grabs you unawares, but the wine is quite clumsy, without nuance, breed, or class. | **14**

AJ | Very full gold; steady mousse. Vinous, structured, secondary fruit scents: real wine. Not hugely articulate, but I get a sense of fine raw materials harvested *à point*. On the palate, by contrast, the Champagne is a little loose and pastoral: sheaves of straw in a broad frame, and the vinous fruit has almost upped and scarpereed. A nice drink, in fact; and there is acidity to lend support; but those for whom Champagne should be taut and tight and tightly laced will need to look elsewhere. This is ripe, open, "mineral," secondary. There's a very attractive wild-hawthorn floral note at the very end. I like it a lot. | **16**

TS | A soft-hay, straw-like aroma. Fine now, but will go oxidative. Drink up. | **14.5**

Pierre Gimonnet Spécial Club 2005 (12.5% ABV) | **15**

ME | Again, brisk acidity, and a straightforward fruitiness. Not complex. | **15**

AJ | Pale to mid-gold; delicate mousse. Delicate, powdery scents of considerable refinement. On the palate, it's a little less refined, with tangy incision and a brisk, firm finish; the dosage is evident. | **13.5**

TS | A nice, fresh, elegant, fresh, light but intense blanc de blancs with a pristine finish, designed for the table. | **16.5**

Larmandier-Bernier Vieille Vigne de Cramant Grand Cru Extra Brut Blanc de Blancs 2007 (12.5% ABV) | **15**

ME | An attractive *à point* Champagne from a ripe end season. Green/gold; fresh citrus ceding to candied fruits, especially lemon, quite seductive—tangy, pithy fruit with a welcome touch of phenolics, perhaps from the skins, to make up for the slight lack of acidity. | **16.5**

AJ | Pale to mid-gold; lively mousse. Dry stony notes, and something almost a little oniony, as if 5% Sauvignon had crept into the blend. The palate is clean and sinewy, but the fruit quality lacks some finesse; the flavors dissipate relatively swiftly, and the overall sense is of a wine whose raw materials weren't quite the very finest. But I'd love a glass of it at the right moment; it is still a sound, elegant, well-crafted blanc de blancs, and the fruits hold well to the finish, where they counterpoint and perfume the mineral-salt notes. | **14.5**

TS | Very, very rich style and a touch fat with a hint of VA. Has a lot going for it, but unfortunately it's too much! | **14**

Jean Milan Terres de Noël Vieilles Vignes Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs 2009 (12% ABV) | **15**

ME | A lime-like, lemon hue, youthful; still in the citrus scale of aromas, an agreeable herbal scent; compact but pure and healthy mouthfeel, a touch pinched just now, very young but promising. | **16**

AJ | Pale gold; lazy mousse. Rather a neutral aroma, even given its youth, as if it was made from Pinot Grigio rather than Chardonnay. Correct but unexciting palate. Gentle mineral salts on the finish provide the main interest; the fruit remains rather featureless and uneventful. | **12.5**

TS | Extremely fresh and floral aromas, so energetic and vital, yet fine and elegant, with lime blossom fruit on the finish. Excellent vintage and an excellent wine. | **16.5**

Palmer & Co Blanc de Blancs 2007 (12% ABV) | **15**

ME | Clear yellow, green lights; even, flowing mousse; slightly earthy nose (near full maturity); quite overt acidity, as if acidified; crisp and straight, a little one-dimensional. | **14.5**

AJ | Pale gold with very steady mousse. Lots on

the aromas here: plenty of white mayblossom; plenty of ground stone; plenty of pounded almond. Fragrant and enticing, with no coarse or false notes. After a while in the glass, it gets a little heavier and more pollen-like, even honeyed. A lovely palate of generosity yet complexity, too. The fruit is soft, downy, poised lemon with foamy crème anglaise; there's also a stony intricacy and length to it. The acidity is vivid, prominent, but beautifully rounded and fruit-laden. The flowers persist on the palate, despite its overall wealth. It has everything except a symphonic, multi-dimensional finish, and there's a slight question mark over palate development in the glass. | **16.5**

TS | Extraordinarily fruity aroma for a Champagne; nothing technically wrong; it has lots going for it but is just a bit one-dimensional. | **14.5**

Louis Roederer Blanc de Blancs Brut 2007 (12% ABV) | **15**

AJ | Pale gold; delicate mousse. Quietly bready, with suggestions of pollen and hay, but a little reserved just now, as if it had a green skin over it that needs stripping away; needs more time to achieve articulacy. Almost slightly reduced, if that were possible. Intense, vivid, and lively on the palate, acid-structured, but richly acidic, with lots of vinosity and pungency beginning to articulate itself around that acidity. A very good wine, which again needs a little longer to resolve itself and show at its best. | **15.5**

TS | Lots of fruit and lots of character, but lacks finesse in the finish. | **14**



JL Vergnon Résonance Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru 2005 (12% ABV) | **15**

ME | This has a nice balance of minerality, pure fruit, and an enduring freshness. Well made. | **16.5**

AJ | Pale to mid-gold; evanescent mousse. Generalized orchard scents. Tangy, forceful palate with a vivid, structured finish. The prominent acidity of 2005 required a very delicate hand with the dosage if it was to be seamlessly incorporated, and in this wine, as in others, there is a contrast between the hard acid profile and the dosage sweetness. But this is still a wine of substance and depth, and the fresh fruit is attractive. | **14.5**

TS | Deep and echoing throughout its length, but it lacks finesse. | **14.5**

Bérèche Côte Grand Cru 2002 (12.5% ABV) | **14.5**

AJ | Mid-gold; sustained mousse. Lots of coffee, toffee, and caramel on the nose here. The palate is

intense and exuberant, but a bit obvious, without the charm of subtlety that you hope for with blanc de blancs. Nonetheless, it is an excellent party choice. | **14**

TS | Oxidative, but not overevolved and has its moments. | **14.5**

Duval-Leroy Blanc de Blancs Brut Nature 2002 (12% ABV) | **14.5**

ME | Lovely, even gold; aromas of great class, lightly honeyed fruit ceding to vinosity; exemplary balance of fruit and vinosity on the palate, elegantly oxidative. *À point*. | **17**

AJ | Full gold; rapidly dissipating mousse. Rather coarsely lactic; butterscotch and banana. Not my favorite Champagne aromas. The palate is full, weighty, earthy, even slightly torpid; it's a Champagne that seems to lack incision and vitality, alas. | **11.5**

TS | The creamy-caramel Chardonnay aroma gives an instant sense of age, and it's feeling a bit old on the palate, though it is not at all oxidative and should be fine for those who like the more mature style. | **14.5**

Nicolas Maillart Les Chaillots Gillis Premier Cru Extra Brut Blanc de Blancs 2004 (12.5% ABV) | **14.5**

ME | Healthy yellow, gold lights; ripe golden fruit, quite straightforward, without nuance, but with refreshing crispness and acidity on the end palate. Second bottle more vigorous, with better energy. | **16**

AJ | Deep gold, with a steady mousse. A rather clunky, caramelly aromatic profile; no great purity of fruit. Dank, murky, earthy flavors. (This is indeed the second bottle.) | **9.5**

TS | First bottle very attractive and oaky, but corked! Second bottle not corked. Distinctly oaky, beautifully crafted, extremely rich fruit. Absolutely clean. | **18**

Maily L'Intemporelle Grand Cru 2004 (12% ABV) | **14.5**

AJ | Pale gold; languid mousse. Full, creamy, supple and soft as you first sniff, then some gentle lemon fruit to follow through. The palate is a little more focused and fresher than the aromas suggested: poised and lively, quite citric, with a relatively tart finish despite the dosage. A lively blanc de blancs with good concentration. | **14.5**

TS | Rich but rustic with a creamy finish. | **14**

Bruno Paillard Blanc de Blancs 2004 (12% ABV) | **14.5**

AJ | Full yellow-gold. Soft, sweet and graceful, though without a lot of fruit finesse. On the palate, this is a firm and structured, with a big block of acidic fruit. Slightly muscular and forceful in style, but pure and long. The dosage is well judged, and there is some ground stone in the finish; perhaps elegance and charm will come with time? | **14.5**

TS | Rather rustic with a slight bitterness on the finish. | **14**

Pierre Péters Cuvée Spéciale Les Chétillons Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Le Mesnil Brut 2002 | 14.5 (12% ABV)

AJ | Mid-gold; sustained mousse. Fresh and enticing, with a mixture of yellow summer fruits and early season apples. Lively and well balanced on the palate, and again built around a core of delicate and well-drawn fruit. Mouth-filling and engaging blanc de blancs, with a structured finish. | 15.5
TS | Oxidative and overdeveloped for a 12-year-old Champagne. | 13.5

Philipponnat Grand Blanc 1988 | 14.5 (12% ABV)

AJ | Very full gold; evanescent mousse. Lots of autumn fruits here; an autumn symphony, and half way to Tokaji... plus a few bubbles. On the palate, the wine is very round-shouldered and evolved, but at the same time relatively richly acidic. That acidity has evolved beautifully, hence its overall *tarte tatin* character. A lovely thing to drink, though utterly different (I presume) to its youthful self. Not for further keeping, unless you have necrophiliac tendencies... | 17
TS | Overoxidized for its age. | 12

Charles & Alfrede Prieur Grand Prieur 2002 Brut (12% ABV) | 14.5

AJ | Mid-gold; sustained mousse. Soft floral notes; gentle autolysis; subtle cream. A disarmingly lovely nose of great nuance and subtlety. The perfect mélange of fruit, quiet vegetal notes, and the richness of yeast, cream and coffee. Vivid, fresh wine in the mouth, but without quite the organizational harmonies the aromas suggested; it's very light and dancing on its feet, very graceful, but petite. Nonetheless delicious! | 16.5
TS | Extremely lactic! | 12.5

Tarlant Vigne d'Antan 2002 Chardonnay Non-greffée | 14.5 (12% ABV)

AJ | Pale to mid-gold; languid mousse. A faintly grassy freshness here, over green fruits. Fresh and biscuity; a well-preserved 2002, though at its peak just now. In style, this is very poised and graceful, flowery and light, with near perfect blanc de blancs proportions. All it lacks (if indeed a lack it is) is a sense of ambition and grandeur. But perhaps prettiness is as important an ideal with this style. | 16
TS | Dried-leaf, straw-like, lacks freshness. | 13

JL Vergnon Confidence Brut Nature Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru 2007 (12% ABV) | 14.5

ME | More yellow-hued, but fresh and inviting; quite subdued, quiet nose; better if soft palate, lowish acidity, I'd guess, pleasant and gentle mouthfeel, lacking a little energy. Agreeable but nothing remarkable. | 14.5
AJ | Full gold; fine mousse. Relatively chunky, straightforward fruits here: green plum and pear.

Moderate concentration on the palate, with a rather uneventful, oxygen-informed style. As a brut nature, though, it is less austere than some, and the chunky fruits of the aromatic profile grow chalkier and stonier on the palate, so I am enjoying this as a *Champagne de terroir*. It has an attractive "mineral" aftertaste, indeed. All that holds it back from a very decent score is its lack of finesse. But I'd enjoy drinking it. | 14
TS | Deeper color typical of the 2007 vintage. Fresh, yeast-complexed fruit aromas, nicely balanced, crisp, lemon-and-lime fruit on palate, very clean and fresh mid-palate, but a touch oxidative on nose and the aftertaste. Not enough oxidative character to put off even me, but it will increase, so drink, don't keep. | 15

JL Vergnon Résonance Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru 2006 | 14.5 (12% ABV)

ME | More tension and core than [Deutz Blanc de Blancs 2007], with a character of exotic ripe fruits. | 15.5
AJ | Full yellow; languid mousse. Slightly tanky scents; round orchard fruit, but not great finesse. Rich, full, tangy, plump; a relatively simple Champagne, but generous in contour, with plenty of classic finishing yeasty complexities. | 14
TS | SO₂ on the nose, basic fruit on the palate, with a bitterness on the finish. When was this disgorged? Needs more time before retasting. Scored as tasted. | 13.5

Bonnaire Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs 2005 (12% ABV) | 14

ME | Brisk acidity and easy simple fruit. Nothing disagreeable but not distinguished. | 14.5
AJ | Full gold, with a gentle mousse. Torpid, caramelly nose, I'm afraid; too much *dosage* on the front foot. The palate is rather flatly acidic, without much lift and life; the ample *dosage* is then poorly integrated. This seems like a blanc de blancs just for the sake of having a blanc de blancs to put in the range, rather than a blend of beautiful Chardonnay that insists on being bottled on its own. | 11
TS | A tad of brewer's malt on the nose, but the rest of this wine is tightly bound and needs to develop. Keep 12-24 months. | 16

Dehours Lieu-Dit Brisefer Extra Brut 2005 (ABV N/A) | 14

ME | Maybe low *dosage*, but this has confectioner's flavors that you either love or hate. Honeyed but again rather clumsy and ill balanced. | 14
AJ | Full gold; languid mousse. Sweet banana and new car fascia scents. Rather a slapdash flavor: those fattier notes with some neutral acidity to brace them up a bit, but little nobility of flavor and no purity or finesse. It's still Champagne, of course, and the virtue of extra-brut (or *brut nature*) is that you can almost always taste the mineral salty or chalky notes at the very end of the palate and don't have to fight off a fog of *dosage*; so here. But the raw materials and the winery handling weren't impeccable. | 12.5
TS | A distinctive, almost terpenic aroma with a

hint of Riesling-like fruit on the palate. A bit of an oddball, but not unappreciated. It does its own thing and is not oxidative. | 15

Pierre Gimonnet Oenophile Extra Brut 2005 (12.5% ABV) | 14

ME | This is much better than [Fleury Cépages Blancs Extra Brut 2005 or Dehours Lieu-Dit Brisefer Extra Brut 2005]. Fine lemon-gold, fine mousse. Effervescence, fruit, and evolving vinosity promised on the nose; the mouthfeel has a silken texture, a suavity that is very attractive, yet there is energy, drive, and elegance, too. Good persistence of flavor. Exceptional. One of those rare, fine 2005s. | 17.5
AJ | Clear pale gold; idling mousse. The nose suggest mushrooms and cardboard. The palate works well enough in technical terms—mousse, acid balance, and length; but the flavors have a kind of heaviness and frumpiness to them that fails to charm, so the unenticing aromas go unredeemed, alas. | 11.5
TS | Very foamy on pouring; has freshness and finesse on the nose but catches at the back of the throat. I am scoring as is now but would like to give the wine another chance if I could taste the same disgorgement in 12 months' time. | 13.5



Lenoble Cuvée Gentilhomme 2006 (12% ABV) | 14

ME | A gloden sheen, a real "robe"; fine, filigreed cordon of bubbles, suave interplay of candied lemon, a growing vinosity. Exciting. | 17
AJ | Full gold; languid mousse. Very honeyed and baroque in aroma; almost a hint of banana. Plump, full, but rather coarse in flavor: a cartoon sketch for a great blanc de blancs, though it has a simple, primal appeal. | 11.5
TS | Too much VA trying to lift the heavy fruit. | 13

Jean Milan Transparence Blanc de Blancs Oger Grand Cru Brut Nature 2007 (12% ABV) | 14

ME | Clear yellow with green lights; maybe a *brut nature* with no *dosage* but smells and tastes as if it has some residual sugar; slight lack of core on the mid-palate, a simple ripeness, with a touch of honey. Not a style I warm to. | 13.5
AJ | Full gold; fine mousse. Slightly coarse and farmy; apples and barn straw. Not offensive, though; loosely autumnal. A structured, full palate of moderate concentration and very plump style for a *brut nature*; lots of ripeness here. Satisfactory, even affable—and how often can you say that about *brut nature*? The finish seems mineral-salty and tonic. It's not, however, a

Champagne for purists, and the finesse and poise are missing. | 13.5
TS | Deeper color, lovely silky-soft mousse, but a touch of VA on both nose and palate does more than elevate the fruit. Another one to drink now; don't keep. | 14.5

Pierre Péters Cuvée Spéciale Les Chétillons Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Le Mesnil Brut 2006 | 14 (12% ABV)

AJ | Pale to mid-gold; sustained mousse. Full, rich aromas, if vague in outline; hop and sweetcorn. Vivid, fresh, and lively, though the fruit is straightforwardly firm, without a lot of subtlety to it. | 13.5
TS | Very fruity, going for the more satisfying style, but would prefer a tad more crisp and refreshing, within the vintage remit, of course. | 14

Pascal Doquet Grand Cru Le Mesnil-sur-Oger Vieilles Vignes Blanc de Blancs Brut 2002 (12.5% ABV) | 13.5

AJ | Mid-gold; delicate mousse. Soft, honeyed, with a note of autumn leaf already; fresh, lively wine on the palate, with plenty of poise. The fruit is frank, straightforward, honest, unrefined. | 13
TS | With a nice mellow aroma, this has flavor and character, but where is the finesse? | 14

ANDREW JEFFORD'S TOP WINES

Drawing any valid conclusions from this blunderbuss tasting (of multiple vintages, with some producers showing different vintages and others just one; of multiple producers, both large and small in scale; and even of multiple formats) is difficult, but let's try. First, blanc de blancs Champagne is, at its best, singularly beautiful. In a way, it is the apogee of Champagne itself: the most elegant, nuanced, and fine-grained division of the most elegant, nuanced, and fine-grained wine style in the world. That doesn't, however, mean that it is a style with little aesthetic width. Chiseled austerity can have huge and mouthwatering appeal, provided that there is enough sewn up inside the wine to sustain its evolution—the brilliantly composed 2007 Ayala Blanc de Blancs and the shyly faultless 2008 Chartogne-Taillet Heurtebise were both perfect examples of this. Other styles of blanc de blancs, by contrast,

Pierre Gimonnet Special Club Chardonnay 2006 (12.5% ABV) | 13.5

ME | Quite brisk and fresh, quiet and wound for the moment, but should age well. Finesse. | 16.5
AJ | Pale gold, with a steady mousse. Rounded, slightly murky nose, lacking freshness, grace, and lift. Clunky, obvious, heavy palate, with coarse fruit qualities. Not a success. | 10.5
TS | Some rubbery notes. | 13

Jacquesson Dizy Corne Bautray Extra Brut 2004 (12% ABV) | 13.5

ME | A riper hue, some weight but some question here of lack of balance and of real class. | 14.5
AJ | Full gold; gentle mousse. This has the jonquil note often apparent in cool-climate southern-hemisphere Chardonnays; apple jam behind. Not the dream blanc de blancs aromatic profile. Simple palate lacking concentration and class. | 10.5
TS | Complete and satisfying. | 15

Lenoble Cuvée Gentilhomme 2002 (12% ABV) | 13.5

AJ | Pale, with a sustained mousse. Creamy, lemony, a touch of lemongrass; relatively subtle and understated. Plenty of *dosage* on the palate, over relatively slight fruit; pleasant but lacks drive and profundity. | 13.5
TS | Very rich, but lacks vitality and finesse. | 13.5

are more giving from the off, with creamy subtleties an intrinsic part of their appeal. The dean of this particular school, Charles Heidsieck's Blanc des Millénaires never fails to appeal, and the 1995 demonstrated the perfectly judged generosity of this wine. I was delighted that none of the wines I scored at 17 or higher was among Champagne's most grossly expensive bottles and that my list of top wines included grower Champagnes, as well as those from less well-known houses and a village cooperative, and came from land classified at 84 percent, as well as from grand cru sites. The famous names don't have a monopoly on quality, and a great grower can redefine the potential of his or her land. That a tasting whose entry ticket comes at such a high price as this one should include a number of disappointing bottles, though, is regrettable—but the discipline of a single grape variety and a single season is a stern one.

ANDREW JEFFORD'S TOP WINES

Ayala Blanc de Blancs 2007	18.5	Duval-Leroy Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru 2006	17.5
Charles Heidsieck Blanc des Millénaires 1995	18.5	Le Mesnil Prestige Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru 2002	17.5
Philipponnat Grand Blanc 2006	18.5	Alfred Gratien Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru 2007	17
Guy Charlemagne Mesnilissime Grand Cru 2004	18	Philipponnat Grand Blanc 1988	17
Chartogne-Taillet Heurtebises 2008	18		

Pascal Doquet Grand Cru Le Mesnil-sur-Oger Blanc de Blancs Brut 2004 (12.5% ABV) | 13

AJ | Mid- to full gold; delicate mousse. Fresh, clean, and lively aromas, though as yet unfocused; slightly brittle, peardroppy palate. | 11.5
TS | Has long-term potential but needs a few years softening and mellowing. | 14

Champagne Doyard Blanc de Blancs Brut Grand Cru 2007 (12.5% ABV) | 13

AJ | Pale gold; delicate mousse. Light and fresh but rather understated at this stage. On the palate, rather harsh and hard, with faintly green edges. | 12
TS | Lots of great character but spoiled by a certain rustic quality of fruit and angular acidity. | 14

Lenoble Collection Rare 1988 Brut (12% ABV) | 12.5

AJ | Full gold; languid mousse. The aromas are risqué and flirting with drainsiness. On the palate, it's melted down into a bit of a puddle; nutty and earthy, to look on the bright side, but I can't say the aging trajectory has been wholly successful. | 12
TS | Past its best; some plastic hints. | 13

The following wines, which unfortunately arrived after the main tasting, were tasted (open) by Michael Edwards and Tom Stevenson only.

Alain Thiénot Blanc de Blancs Cuvée Stanislas 2005 (12.5% ABV) | 16

ME | Star-bright, imposing hue, rich gold with a hint of green, at once speaking ripeness and freshness. Stylish aromas of hazelnuts and the beginnings of honey lead on to an energetic palate (high praise in this hot challenging harvest) and a fine marriage of racy, elegant acidity and some density of fruit, auguring well for a good life yet—to 2017 or even 2020. | 17
TS | A bit too rich, without the requisite balance to lighten the load, and this leads the palate astray on the finish. Might improve, but it's difficult to say at this juncture. | 15.5

Alain Thiénot La Vigne aux Gamins 2004 (12% ABV) | 17.5

ME | A subtler green gold than the Stanislas. A favored single plot from old vines in (grand cru) Avize. The main impression is a real sense of place, the vineyard on the upper *fin* slopes, close to the sunny Oger road. *Sizillé*—that is, precise—with a lovely, light-footed athleticism, no overextraction, no wood, nothing "big," great purity. *Sans* makeup. Very fine. | 18+
TS | Pale-lemon color belies its toasty-gunpowder nose and rich, grippy-creamy fruit, but returns as expected with a fresh, crisp finish, underscored by an energetic, silky mousse. This has the potential to develop. | 17 ■