

# Champagne's ancient grape varieties

## Tom Stevenson

The first mention of vine-growing in Champagne can be dated to AD 651, when Grimoald the Elder wrote to the Benedictine bishop Remaclus, informing of a vineyard at Terune (now Terron-sur-Aisne), some 30 miles (50km) northeast of Reims, which had been given to him by King Sigebert III of Austrasia.

Unfortunately, we do not know what grape varieties were grown at the time. Nor are we certain what grapes were cultivated anywhere else in Champagne before the 14th century, when various varieties appear in correspondence and other documentation.

It is widely accepted but not proven that, throughout the Middle Ages, Champagne's vineyards were dominated by only two grapes—the Gouais Noir (producing light reds in the *montagne*) and Fromenteau (pale *vin gris* in the *rivière*)—and yet, by the 17th century, Champagne was seemingly awash with myriad grape varieties.

After consulting 19th-century works such as *Topographie de Tous les Vignobles Connus* (André Jullien, Paris; 1816–48), *Traité de la Coulture de la Vigne* (BA Lenoir, Paris; 1928), *Cours Complet d'Agriculture* (Bosc, Paris; 1822), *Encyclopédie Méthodique* (Tessier, Thouin, & Bosc, Paris; 1821), *A History of Champagne* (Henry Vizetelly, London; 1882), and that great 19th-century decoder of ancient synonyms *Flore des Jardins et des Grandes Cultures* (NC Serigne, Paris; 1849), it is clear that many apparently different grapes were in fact the same variety, while others were merely alternative spellings or localized variants. Some synonyms were blatantly incorrect, such as Muscat Blanc, which was wrongly used for Chasselas; and to further confuse matters, some grape names referred to different varieties in certain parts of Champagne, such as Morillon Noir, which was generally synonymous with Pinot Noir, though it sometimes

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indicated Pinot Noir Précoce, but that would normally be distinguished as Morillon Hâti—except in the Aube, where Morillon Noir was used for the Tressot!

To get a grip on the bewildering number of Champagne's ancient grapes, we need to list the nomenclature according to distinct varieties or color mutation, as below.

Until as recently as 15 years ago, very few people knew about the so-called ancient varieties. Most Champagne talk revolved around what was believed to be the only three authorized varieties—Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Meunier—but even that was not quite true because, legally, the only authorized varieties were “les diverses variétés de pinot, l’arbanne, le petit meslier.” Chardonnay was not mentioned in any Champagne legislation until the decree law of January 17, 1978, yet it was already very much in vogue.

In my next column, I will explain that paradox and look closely at those ancient grapes that are still legally cultivated in Champagne today (namely Arbanne, Fromenteau, Petit Meslier, and Pinot Blanc), where they are grown, who grows them, and who produces pure varietal cuvées from them. ■

### WHITE GRAPES

**Aligoté** (Beaunois, Troyen Blanc)

**Arbanne** (Arbane, Vert-Blanc)

**Chardonnay** (Beaunois, Maurillon Blanc, Chardonnat, Epinette de Champagne, Roméré, Romeret)

**Chasselas** (Bar sur Aube, Bicane, Bourdelais, Chasselas Doré, Chasselas Dur, Muscat Blanc, Raisin de Champagne): Chasselas still exists in the garden of Billecart-Salmon in Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, where it's used as a “vineyard clock,” since its growing season is 7–10 days earlier than classic Champagne varieties, and it can therefore give advance warning of pests and other disorders.

**Eibling** (Facan): Grown in Champagne-Ardennes

**Folle Blanche** (Damery, Gros Plant, Gros Plant Vert): Widely planted up to the 19th century but cultivated only in Chambrey in the Ardre Valley by 1911.

**Gouais Blanc** (Gouais de Mardeuil, Gouest, Gouest Blanc, Gros Gouais Blanc, Marmot, Marmot Blanc): Although once one of the most prolific grapes in Champagne, by the early 20th century it was cultivated by growers in just two villages, Courdemange and Glannes, in the Vitry-le-François district.

**Languedoc Blanc**: Low-quality Aube variety mentioned by Jullien; identity unknown but possibly Folle Blanche.

**Mauzac** (Mauzat): Used to be grown in Champagne-Ardennes.

**Meslier Saint François** (François Blanc): Natural Gouais Blanc x Chenin Blanc cross.

**Petit Meslier** (Arbois, Arboisier, Meslier)

**Peurion** (Milleron, Milleron Troyen Blanc, Peurichon, Purion, Troyen Blanc): White variety once commonly found in the Aube, but low-quality.

**Pinot Blanc** (Arboisier, Bargeois, Beaunois, Blanc Doré, Bon Blanc, Epinette, Epinette Blanc, Epinette Blanche, Gamay Blanc, Gentil, Gros Blanc, Maubard, Mauribard, Petit Blanc, Pineau Blanc)

**Plant Doux**: Identity unknown, but it is described as one of the worst-quality grapes in Champagne.

**Plant Verdilasse**: Low-quality Aube variety, identity unknown.

**Savagnin Blanc**: Planted at Buxeuil in the Aube by Hyacinthe Diligent in the 19th century.



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### BLACK GRAPES

**Bachet Noir** (François): Natural Pinot x Gouais Blanc cross.

**Chanet** (Chanay, Chané): Identity unknown, but it is described as a “black variety” from the Loire.

**Couleux Noir**: Identity unknown, but it is described as “very late ripening.”

**Enfariné Noir** (Gouais, Gouais Noir, Gouest): Not related to true Gouais.

**Gamay** (Gamet, Grosse Nature, Malin Noir, Melon Noir): Once the most common variety in the Aube, although also grown in the Marne.

**Meunier** (Meunier Noir, Meusnier, Meusnier Noir, Morillon Taconné, Plant de Brie)

**Perlusot**: Identity unknown, but it is described as a “black variety”; an “esteemed grape” that can make “good strong wine.”

**Pendillard Noir**: Identity unknown, but it is described as “of little esteem.”

**Pinot Noir** (Auvernat, Bon Noir, Demi-Plant Noir, Gamery, Gros Plant Doré Noir, Maître Noir, Maurillon, Morillon, Morillon Noir, Noirien, Petit Noir, Petit Plant Doré, Petit Plant Doré d'Aÿ, Petit Plant Vert, Pineau Franc, Pineau Rouge, Plant Doré, Plant Doré d'Aÿ, Plant d'Écueil, Plant de Trépail, Plant de Vertus, Rouge Doré, Samoreau, Vert Doré)

**Pinot Noir Précoce** (Magdeleine, Morillon Noir, Morillon Hâtif)

**Tressot** (Bourguignon, Bourguignon Rouge, Morillon Noir)

**Troyen Noir** (Troyen): Low-quality grape once grown in the Aube.

**Chardonnay was not mentioned in Champagne legislation until 1978**

### RED OR GRIS GRAPES

**Chasselas Rouge**: Color mutation.

**Esplein Vert**: Identity unknown; described as a “red variety” that “requires fertile soil,” despite its name, which possibly referred to its late-ripening.

**Petit Plant Gris**: Identity unknown; French historian Bonal warned against confusing it with Pinot Gris.

**Pinot Gris** (Auvernat Gris, Burot, Enfumé, Enfumé Noir, Fromenté Rose, Fromenté Violet, Fromenteau, Frumenteau, Griset, Morillon Blanc): Gros Plant Gris, Enfumé is still grown by Aubry and Benoît Lahaye as distinct from their Fromenteau, while Enfumé Noir is presumably a darker-skinned variant of Pinot Gris that is not quite Pinot Noir.

### TEINTURIER GRAPES

**Teinturier** (Noiraut, Teinturier Noir): Grape variety with red juice.

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