

Champagne's ancient grape varieties (II)

Tom Stevenson



This article from *The World of Fine Wine* may not be sold, altered in any way, or circulated without this statement. Every issue of *The World of Fine Wine* features coverage of the world's finest wines in their historical and cultural context, along with news, reviews, interviews, and comprehensive international auction results. A subscription includes access to the complete digital archive, stretching back 16 years. For further information and to subscribe to *The World of Fine Wine*, please visit www.worldoffinewine.com or call +44 020 7406 6790.

I continue my examination of Champagne's ancient varieties by looking at where those that are still legal are growing today, who grows them, and who makes pure varietal cuvées. But first I will unravel the mystery of why Chardonnay was not even mentioned in Champagne's legislation until 1978.

The law of July 27, 1927, authorized only "*les diverses variétés de pinot, l'arbanne, le petit meslier*" for the production of Champagne, with no reference to Chardonnay. This was still the case when the decree-law of January 17, 1978, became the first Champagne legislation to mention Chardonnay—not by adding it to the list of authorized varieties but merely by slipping it into rules that modified the methods of pruning. It was a bit like modifying the PGI for how Cornish pasties should be crimped, only to discover that someone had slipped chicken into the list of authorized ingredients!

In fact, Chardonnay was not listed as an authorized variety until 2010, when every AOC had to submit a new *cahier des charges*. So, why was Chardonnay missing in the first place?

Although Chardonnay was known to be a distinct variety as long ago as 1868, it was commonly referred to in Champagne as Pinot Chardonnay, even as recently as the 1980s, so there is little doubt that, in 1927, "*diverses variétés de pinot*" would have been understood to include Chardonnay (as well as Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, and, of course, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier).

What goes around comes around, as they say, and in 1999, the parentage of Chardonnay was established as Gouais Blanc x Pinot Noir. This not only made it a "Pinot variety," but in 2018 the Chardonnay was determined to have 49 percent DNA from the Pinot Noir itself and 17 percent DNA from the Gouais grape (revealing Pinot Noir as part of the heritage of that grape for the first time). With a total of 66 percent

Chardonnay was not listed as an authorized variety until 2010. So, why was it missing in the first place? It was commonly referred to in Champagne as Pinot Chardonnay as recently as the 1980s, so "diverses variétés de pinot" would have been understood to include Chardonnay

Pinot DNA, it does make me admire how in tune with nature those old-timers were to intuitively believe that Chardonnay was a member of the Pinot family. Science proved them wrong only to return a century later to prove them right.

Ancient survivors

Arbanne, Fromenteau, Petit Meslier, and Pinot Blanc enjoy a disproportionate amount of publicity, since they represent just 103ha (255 acres), or less than 0.3 percent of all the vines growing in Champagne today.

Arbanne

The earliest references to this grape date back to the 14th century in Les Riceys, and by 1801 it was sufficiently well regarded to be mentioned by Jean-Antoine Chaptal, who singled out the Aube vineyards of Morveaux in Baroville. Two people are responsible for the revival of Arbanne: Lucien Moutard, who replanted it in 1952, and his grandfather Henry Maréchaux, who had maintained the variety in his nursery since 1900. According to 19th-century accounts, Arbanne crops at very low yields and has such a distinctive aroma that even with a blend, local growers would immediately exclaim, "Ah, Arbanne!" when entering a cuverie.

Where does it grow today?

Bligny, Buxeuil, Chamery, Charly-sur-Marne, Chavot-Courcourt Jouy-lès-Reims, Oeuilly, Les Riceys, Urville, Venteuil

Who grows it?

Aubry, Château de Bligny, Drappier, Olivier Horiot, Laherte Frères, Jean-François Launay, Léguillette-Romelot, Moutard, Thomas Perseval, Perseval-Farge, Tarlant

Pure Arbanne cuvées?

Arbane Pure (Olivier Horiot), Cépage Arbane (Moutard)

Fromenteau

Fromenteau (aka Pinot Gris) is a direct mutation of Pinot Noir. The wines of Sillery owe their fame to this grape under Nicolas Brûlart in the 17th century, whence it spread, becoming one of the most prolific varieties in Champagne until the 19th century. By the 20th century, what was left of this variety (mostly in the Aube) would usually be mixed in with other grapes at the presshouse.

Where does it grow today?

Chamery, Chavot-Courcourt, Crouettes-sur-Marne, Jouy-lès-Reims, Les Riceys, Urville, Verzy

Who grows it?

Aubry, Dérot-Delugny, Drappier, Olivier Horiot, Laherte Frères, Mouzon-Leroux, Perseval-Farge

Pure Fromenteau cuvées?

Dérot-Delugny Cuvée des Fondateurs, Drappier Trop M'en Faut

Petit Meslier

Another ancient white Champagne variety, Petit Meslier is a spontaneous cross of Gouais Blanc x Savagnin Blanc. Its traditional home is the Aube, where it once accounted for 4.5 percent of the vineyards (ten times the popularity of Arbanne). It was also found in the Marne *département*, where the Petit Meslier of Venteuil enjoyed some repute. Plantations dwindled to almost nothing,

but it was replanted in 1959—not in the Aube or indeed Venteuil but in the *lieu-dit* of Corne Beauray, Dizi, by the Chiquet family, who would later come to own Jacquesson. Due to its difficulty to ripen in Champagne's climate, the contribution of Petit Meslier to any cuvée was initially to increase the acidity and reduce the alcohol, pretty much as Petit Verdot did in Bordeaux. Its berries are very small, round, and dark yellow in color. In climates where it can ripen, it can have a resinous flavor, as James Irvine in Australia's Eden Valley demonstrated in the 1990s. (Irvine and Jacquesson had collaborated on Petit Meslier.)

Where does it grow today?

Bligny, Buxeuil, Chamery, Charly-sur-Marne, Chavot-Courcourt Gyé-sur-Seine, Jouy-lès-Reims, Oeuilly, Les Riceys, Urville, Venteuil

Who grows it?

Aubry, Robert Barbichon, Château de Bligny, Drappier, Duval-Leroy, Olivier Horiot, Jacquesson, Laherte Frères, Jean-François Launay, Léguillette-Romelot, Mignon-Boulard, Moutard, Thomas Perseval, Perseval-Farge, Tarlant

Pure varietal Petit Meslier cuvées?

Duval-Leroy Petit Meslier (formerly Authentis)

Pinot Blanc

This will come as a surprise to many, but as recently as 1900 this variety accounted for one third of Champagne, and its cultivation was concentrated in the Côte des Blancs, where Le Mesnil and Chouilly built their reputations not on Chardonnay but on Pinot Blanc, a direct mutation of the Pinot Noir alone. Unfortunately, there have been more disasters than successes with Pinot Blanc, because it can easily be overwhelmed by oak and *bâtonnage*, but such failures are the fault of producers, not the variety.

Where does it grow today?

Bligny, Buxeuil, Celles-sur-Ource, Charly-sur-Marne, Chavot-Courcourt, Landreville, Oeuilly, Polissot, Les Riceys, Urville

Who grows it?

Château de Bligny, Cédric Bouchard, Drappier, François Gautherot, Olivier Horiot, Laherte Frères, Léguillette-Romelot, Moutard, Thomas Perseval, Piollot, Tarlant

Pure varietal Pinot Blanc cuvées?

Roses de Jeanne La Bolorée (Cédric Bouchard), Pinot Blanc Extra Brut (Chassenay d'Arce), Le Champ du Clos (Charles Dufour), Cuvée des Lys (Philippe Fontaine), L'Originale (Pierre Gerbais), Colas Robin (Piollot), Cuvée Heritage (Emmanuel Tassin).

DOMAINE FAIVELEY
 1827-1831-1832
 1833-1834-1835-1836-1837-1838-1839-1840-1841-1842-1843-1844-1845-1846-1847-1848-1849-1850-1851-1852-1853-1854-1855-1856-1857-1858-1859-1860-1861-1862-1863-1864-1865-1866-1867-1868-1869-1870-1871-1872-1873-1874-1875-1876-1877-1878-1879-1880-1881-1882-1883-1884-1885-1886-1887-1888-1889-1890-1891-1892-1893-1894-1895-1896-1897-1898-1899-1900-1901-1902-1903-1904-1905-1906-1907-1908-1909-1910-1911-1912-1913-1914-1915-1916-1917-1918-1919-1920-1921-1922-1923-1924-1925-1926-1927-1928-1929-1930-1931-1932-1933-1934-1935-1936-1937-1938-1939-1940-1941-1942-1943-1944-1945-1946-1947-1948-1949-1950-1951-1952-1953-1954-1955-1956-1957-1958-1959-1960-1961-1962-1963-1964-1965-1966-1967-1968-1969-1970-1971-1972-1973-1974-1975-1976-1977-1978-1979-1980-1981-1982-1983-1984-1985-1986-1987-1988-1989-1990-1991-1992-1993-1994-1995-1996-1997-1998-1999-2000-2001-2002-2003-2004-2005-2006-2007-2008-2009-2010-2011-2012-2013-2014-2015-2016-2017-2018-2019-2020-2021-2022-2023-2024-2025-2026-2027-2028-2029-2030-2031-2032-2033-2034-2035-2036-2037-2038-2039-2040-2041-2042-2043-2044-2045-2046-2047-2048-2049-2050-2051-2052-2053-2054-2055-2056-2057-2058-2059-2060-2061-2062-2063-2064-2065-2066-2067-2068-2069-2070-2071-2072-2073-2074-2075-2076-2077-2078-2079-2080-2081-2082-2083-2084-2085-2086-2087-2088-2089-2090-2091-2092-2093-2094-2095-2096-2097-2098-2099-2100

« In the heart of Burgundy, we strive to reveal the finest terroirs of our family domaine. »

Eric & Erwan Faiveley, 7th generation
www.domaine-faiveley.com

DRINK RESPONSIBLY