

# 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.

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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** (Beauvais, Troyen Blanc)

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

**Chardonnay** (Beauvais, 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.

**Elbling** (Facan): Grown in Champagne-Ardenne

**Folle Blanche** (Damery, Gros Plant, Gros Plant Vert): Widely planted up to the 19th century but cultivated only in Chambrecy 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-Ardenne.

**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, Beauvais, 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.