

WINE News

With one of the nation's largest selections of Champagne, K&L offers everything from micro-production, single-vineyard Champagne to value-priced direct imports, with plenty of famous names in between.



OCTOBER 21, 2013 FEATURES

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Champagne: Surprising Values

By Gary Westby

It is a great time to be a Champagne lover. More top quality, small scale producers are being imported to the U.S. than ever before, and many of the big houses have responded by improving their viticulture and, in turn, their Champagne. While Champagne isn't inexpensive, it continues to offer value while many producers in Napa, Bordeaux and Burgundy have raised prices scandalously.

At the time of writing we had 304 different Champagne offerings at K&L—the best selection we have ever had. The K&L Champagne team would like to introduce you to a few highlights here, and we hope to discuss the rest of our selection with you in the stores, on the phone or by email. **Kyle Kurani** and **I** can be found in the Redwood City store, **Scott Beckerley** in San Francisco and **Mari Keilman** in Hollywood.

This year I marked off my 25th trip to the Champagne region and the 13th year of our direct import program. The first producer that we brought in direct was Champagne Aspasie. Today the Aristons, who make Aspasie, are leading by example, pushing me to do a better job here at K&L by pushing themselves to innovate and improve. Each year's offerings from them are a little bit better than the last.

Paul-Vincent Ariston owns 30 acres of vines in the picturesque village of Brouillet in the far northwest of the Champagne region. His property was originally owned by Jean-Rémy Moët, who was granted the land after campaigning with Joan of Arc. Paul-Vincent has an extroverted, gregarious personality and so do his wines. His entry level offering, the **Ariston Aspasie "Carte Blanche" Brut*** (\$27.99) has plenty of authentic toast and refreshing vibrancy. Most Champagne at this price is rushed to market after only 15 months, the legal minimum amount of

time Champagne must be aged in the bottle, but the Carte Blanche gets five years! It is composed of 40% Chardonnay, 30% Meunier and 30% Pinot Noir and is initially fermented in stainless steel with full malolactic. The fabulous **Ariston Aspasie Brut Blanc de Blancs*** (\$34.99) is from one steep, east-facing parcel called the Gouttes d'Or and is one of my favorite wines in the store. The current batch is based on 2009, although not labeled as vintage, and has roundness not often found in an all-Chardonnay offering from Champagne. I love serving this as an apéritif since it is creamy and satisfying, but finishes with long, crisp, mineral drive. The **Ariston Aspasie "Cepages d'Antan" Brut*** (\$99.00) is the top wine that Paul-Vincent makes and is the most exotic Champagne that we sell at K&L, as well as one of the best at any price. It is composed of ancient vine varieties that nearly went extinct in Champagne: 40% Arbanne, 40% Petite Meslier and 20% Pinot Blanc. These high acid, full-flavored grape varieties were a lot of work and so they were not replanted after phylloxera struck at the turn of the century. This wine has richness on the scale of Grand Cru Chablis and a near infinite, laser beam finish that makes me go back for more. Learn more about this great bottle by visiting our blog, and watching the **video** of Paul-Vincent explaining the wine in the vineyard where it was made.

When we first started importing small producers from Champagne very few Americans were visiting the region looking for them. I lucked out by getting an introduction to Launois, one of Champagne's cult producers, more than 10 years ago. This is the only Champagne I have ever sold to someone from Champagne to take back to France with them! We have never been able to promote the wines properly, as our

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Cover: Festigny in the Valley of the Marne, some of Champagne's undiscovered country. Left: Quentin Paillard. Right: Garance and Alain Thienot.

GETTING CHAMPAGNE *A Seat at the Table*

People forget that Champagne is wine that can pair with a wider variety of foods than almost any other wine and do so with grace and an air of celebration. At a recent dinner at Chez TJ, Chef Jarad Gallagher demonstrated Champagne's culinary compatibility with the great wines of Champagne Thienot. Thienot is not a new name in Champagne, but it is new to us here in the States. They were founded in 1985 and have both amazing vineyard sites for their top-end wines and great relationships with some of the best growers in the region. K&L is lucky to be one of the first U.S. retailers to have their wines. Below are the menu and pairings from that dinner.

Hors d'Oeuvres and Amuse Bouches: Kumamoto oysters, House-made Goat Cheese-Stuffed Garden Tomato, Wagyu Tartar, Pot of Earth, Fried Egg. Paired with **Thienot Brut (\$39.99)**. The Thienot Brut played a beautiful counterpart to these unctuous starters.

First Course: Kampachi with Cucumber, Herbs and Caviar. Served with **Thienot Brut Rosé (\$64.99)**. The Rosé is full of bright cherry and strawberry fruit, and it also delivers a touch of spice and an herbal quality that played right into this dish.

Second Course: Saskatchewan Chanterelle Risotto with Summer Truffle, Parmigiano-Reggiano and English Peas. Paired with **2005 Thienot "Cuvée Stanislaus" Brut Blanc de Blancs (\$99.00)**. This

wine handled the bold flavors of the truffled risotto with its mineral-driven focus, hints of smoke and touch of vanilla and hazelnut.

Third Course: Whole Roasted Quail with Eggplant and Heirloom Squash. Paired with **1999 Thienot "Cuvée Alain Thienot" Brut (\$99.00)**. Full of smoked cherries, black walnuts and baked black bread, this assertive wine's palate complemented the crispy skin and savory dark meat of the game bird without competing.

Fourth Course: Whole Roasted Saddle of South Texas Antelope with Black Garlic Spaetzle, Gooseberries and Shishito Peppers. Paired with **2006 Thienot "Cuvée Garance" Brut Blanc de Rouges (\$99.00)**. The clean, tender antelope was stunning, not gamey at all, and it paired well with this elegant Pinot Noir, full of red fruit and a hit of spice.

Dessert: Pear Galette with Caramel, Brown Butter and Spices. Paired with **2002 Thienot "La Vigne aux Gamins" Brut Blanc de Blancs (\$149.00)**. Marzipan, fine chalky minerality, elegant white flowers; so pretty, and it was lovely with the galette.

Granted, I don't regularly cook anywhere on the level that they do at Chez TJ, but I think similar flavor profiles can be translated to simpler dishes at home. I hope this sheds light on how Champagne deserves a seat at the big kid table at your next dinner.

—Kyle Kurani

A LITTLE BOUZY *Champagne Pierre Paillard*

One of my current favorite, small-estate Champagne houses is **Pierre Paillard**. The winery is located in the village of Bouzy, a Grand Cru village. It is also home to Champagne's most famous still red, Bouzy Rouge, which is also produced at Pierre Paillard. Nearly all of the large, great Champagne houses purchase fruit from the southern slopes of this village. The house of Pierre Paillard was founded in 1946; the vines average 23 years of age, with the older, 40-year-old vines being used to make vintage wines. Current winemaker Quentin Paillard keeps his dosage at a low seven grams per liter, which results in wines that have fine acidity, great depth and lingering finishes. The "starter" for his lineup is the **Pierre Paillard Grand Cru Brut* (\$39.99)**, which is a total bargain. It is a blend of 60% Pinot Noir and 40% Chardonnay and has clean apple and peach notes, with bright Bouzy Bing cherry fruit at the forefront. Suitable as an apéritif or with seafood. Having a party? The magnum is only **\$79.99!** The gorgeous **Pierre Paillard Grand Cru Brut Rosé* (\$49.99)** is 70% Chardonnay, 23% Pinot Noir and 7% Bouzy

Rouge. Very dry, with refreshing and bright raspberry notes as well freshly-picked, tart strawberry fruit. It should not be missed. The **2004 Pierre Paillard Grand Cru Brut Vintage* (\$59.99)** is simply fantastic, with red fruits, some savory spice and excellent minerality. It was dosed at a super-low 3.5 grams per liter. However, it is not one of those razor-sharp, tooth-rattling acid monsters. Like all of Quentin's Champagnes this is very subtle. For those seeking the unusual, there are the **Pierre Paillard "Acte 1" Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs*** and **Blanc de Noirs* (\$49.99 each)**. They are both from 2008, although they are not labeled vintage. Both have deep varietal characteristics, with understated fruit, great minerality and subtleness. Lastly, there is the **2008 Pierre Paillard Bouzy Rouge Coteaux Champenois* (\$34.99)**. Many people find Bouzy Rouge to be too light, but I am a fan of it. This one has light, bright Bing cherry fruit and just a hint of savory spice in the background. Perfectly suitable for game birds or a nice salmon filet.

—Scott Beckerley

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allocations were very tight, but Bernard Launois has decided to export more... So now I can tell the story! Bernard Launois does things differently than the rest of the Champenois, picking a week to 10 days later than his neighbors and using only massal-selected plants in favor of the more common clones. All of the Champagne that we bring in from Launois is 100% Grand Cru and all Chardonnay, and the wines have the authoritative chalk-driven focus that one would expect from top sites in the Cotes de Blancs. They have a supple texture that is rare in blanc de blancs and an easy-to-drink personality that belies the complexity underneath all that pleasant toast and white fruit. The **Launois "Cuvée Reserve" Brut Blanc de Blancs*** (\$34.99) is made from fruit grown in the Grand Crus of Mesnil, Oger, Cramant and Avize, the highest-priced vineyards in all of Champagne. It has the

laid-back elegance of a big house tête de cuvée, and if they had access to this fruit, any big house would use it for the top of their range. This is a must-try for any Champagne lover. The **Launois "Quartz" Brut Blanc de Blancs*** (\$34.99) is exclusively from the famous Chetillons parcel in Mesnil, and made at two-thirds the pressure of a normal bottle of Champagne. It has pure, crystalline white fruit that reminds me of Puligny-Montrachet. The top of the line **2004 Launois "Special Club" Brut Blanc de Blancs*** (\$59.99) is from two 50-plus-year-old parcels, the best of the house's vines, and is one of the best Champagnes that we sell at any price. This dry, precise, defined Champagne will age very gracefully in your cellar, or blow your mind tonight with oysters or sushi. I hope that you find plenty of reasons to raise a glass of Champagne. A toast to you!

Four Great Champagnes Under \$35

PrévotEAU-Perrier "Tradition" Brut* (\$29.99) A brand new direct import for K&L, this is elegant, easy to drink Champagne at a price that won't break the bank. Composed of 50% Meunier, 35% Pinot Noir and 15% Chardonnay, this great bottle has a little bit of toast and a lot of refreshing zing.



Piper-Heidsieck Brut (\$29.99) The most ascendant pair of Grand Marque producers are Piper and Charles Heidsieck. If you haven't tasted this Champagne recently you should make it a priority. This is now full of big brioche character and tiny bubbles.

Elisabeth Goutorbe "Cuvée Eclatante" Brut* (\$34.99) Mostly made from Ay Grand Cru and entirely estate, this big, concentrated Pinot powerhouse still finishes with chalky focus. This is unbelievable Champagne for the price!

Marguet Père et Fils "Cuvée Reserve" Brut* (\$34.99) If you are after effortless elegance, this Champagne will finesse the pants off of you, especially given the direct import pricing. It has Puligny-Montrachet-like lime zip and a compact

bead of streamers that normally are only found in much more expensive Champagne.

Four Secret Greats of Champagne

2006 Michel Loriot "Pinot Meunier Vieilles Vignes" Brut* (\$49.99) This single-vineyard Champagne comes from the l'Arpent vineyard that was planted in 1942. It is one of the most concentrated, complex Champagnes that we have at any price, and it will thrill folks who like big stuff like Krug or Bollinger. One of the best kept secrets in the store!

2004 Daniel Ginsburg "Cuvée Rene Millésime" Brut Blanc de Blancs* (\$49.99) This is single-barrel Champagne from a 3,000-liter foudre in Ay that is made of organic Chardonnay from the village of Trepail. With wonderful spice and round white fruit, this has all the good parts of apple pie with none of the sugar. Bracing enough to pair with sushi, but enough of a wine to stand on its own.



Bruno Michel Premier Cru Brut Blanc de Blancs* (\$39.99) This single-vineyard Chardonnay is organically grown. From one of the coldest Premier Cru microclimates in Pierry, it is one of our driest, raciest Champagnes and the best pairing with shellfish!

Charles Heidsieck "Brut Reserve" (\$49.99) This is the best value in Grand Marque Champagne in the store, with plenty of baguette richness and finely-textured bubbles. The only problem with this wine is the small 750ml size!

Four Over-the-Top Champagnes

2005 Louis Roederer "Cristal" Brut (\$199.00)

All estate-grown fruit from the biggest large-house advocate of organics in Champagne. Cristal is much more than fancy bling; it is one of the world's great wines. Clean, dry and exquisitely-balanced.



2006 Sapience Brut* (\$189.00) Composed entirely of organically grown, mid-slope, old vine fruit from a number of the best growers in Champagne, this has the laid-back balance of the best big houses and the concentration and excitement of the best of the small houses. Mind-blowing Champagne!

Laurent-Perrier "Grand Siècle" Brut (\$109.00)

Blended not just across vineyards and grape varieties, but also across time, LP's top of the line always delivers the rich, balanced power that a top wine should. It is composed of 20% 1999, 20% 1997 and 60% 1996 reserve wines, even parts Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, entirely from Grand Cru sites.

2002 Billecart-Salmon "Cuvée Nicolas François Billecart" NFB Brut (\$99.00) While most producers are moving on to much more recent vintages, Billecart is just releasing this great 2002. This might be the best wine in their lineup with its creamy texture and electric finish. This is a great splurge!



Patrick Arnould of Champagne Michel Arnould driving his forklift.

The Verzenay Phenomenon

by Mari Keilman

Location, location, location: Just like in real estate, great terroir is all about the “where,” and the tiny little commune of Verzenay in the northern part of the Montagne de Reims is the ideal location to grow world class Pinot Noir. The village of Verzenay faces north, typically a factor that would hinder adequate ripening, and yet the grapes miraculously mature, producing some of the most intensely structured and definitive Pinot Noirs, with signature black cherry, hazelnut and pepper aromatics. Its northerly orientation, marginal weather conditions and hillside situation all contribute to this special terroir, giving Verzenay wines their unequalled complexity, structure and strength.

Smack dab in the middle of Verzenay, controlling 12 hectares of some of the blackest grapes in all of Champagne, is the house of Michel Arnould et Fils. Since the turn of the century, the Arnould family has been growing grapes and selling them to the likes of Bollinger and Roederer, who used them as base wine for their vintage R&D and Cristal. It was only when grape prices collapsed in the early 1930s that

the family decided to start producing Champagne under their own name. Since then, Michel Arnould has succeeded in achieving a house style that is highly sophisticated yet surprisingly elegant, considering its terroir. The Champagnes of Michel Arnould demonstrate a harmonious relationship between tension and balance, broadness and precision, elegance and power.

The **Michel Arnould Verzenay “Brut Reserve”* (\$32.99)** is perfect for any occasion. It has a playful nature, with fresh toasted nuts, ripe sweet citrus and tart pomme fruit bouncing off of its bracing acidity, elegant texture and a refined bead. The 70% Pinot Noir gives this Brut its full body and structure, while the elegance and refined texture come from the 30% Chardonnay.

Rich, yet exquisitely balanced, the **Michel Arnould “Grand Cuvée” Brut* (\$34.99)** has a subtle minerality on the nose, classic black cherry and tangy citrus fruit in the mouth and an elegant, seamless hazelnut finish. The Cuvée possesses so much complexity, yet it simultaneously has such subtlety and elegance.

I’ve always had a soft spot in the my heart for the house’s signature style, but the **2007 Michel Arnould “Carte d’Or” Vintage Brut* (\$49.99)** takes it to a whole new level. Yes, this half and half blend of Chardonnay from Oger and Pinot Noir from Verzenay needs time, but the potential for this Champagne is readily evident from the first moment the cork is popped. Upon first nosing the Carte d’Or, aromatics of chalk and wet river stone emerge from the glass, but as the Champagne has time to breathe, notes of salty brioche, baked butter and honeycomb take shape. On the palate this Champagne is layered with flavors of dried flowers, acacia, sweet star fruit and other bright tropical fruits. What truly makes the Carte d’Or transcendent are its intense palate, precise bead, focused structure and lengthy finish—a spectacularly balanced Champagne!



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