



Grower Champagne: the best names

It's all the rage, but grower Champagne – whereby the wine is produced by the same estate that owns the vineyards – is unfamiliar territory compared to the region's famous houses. Luckily Champagne expert Peter Liem is on hand to act as guide to the most exciting small estates, and their wines

WHY DRINK 'GROWER Champagne'? For me, good wine is above all an expression of place, and the profundity of that expression often reflects the quality of the viticulture involved. Terroir-expressive Champagne may be guided by practices in the winery, but its character originates in the vineyards.

This may not be exclusive to grower Champagne – after all, there are Champagne houses that take pride in viticulture and vineyard ownership as well, and top *négociants* who purchase conscientiously can obtain good fruit. But grower Champagne brings these issues more prominently to the foreground, and I appreciate having a more directly traceable link from the wine in my glass to the vineyards that it came from.

Grower Champagne doesn't guarantee quality or terroir expression – there are good growers and mediocre growers, just as there

are good Champagne houses and mediocre ones. What I find among the best grower Champagnes, though, is a great diversity of style: the most forward-thinking of these small producers can be less constrained by traditional models, allowing them greater latitude to explore stylistic boundaries.

Twentieth-century assumptions concerning issues such as ripeness, dosage, vinification and viticulture are all being challenged, and many growers are embracing more narrowly defined concepts of terroir, such as *single-cru* or *single-vineyard* Champagnes.

Perhaps more than anything, grower Champagnes encourage us to engage with what's in the glass, as we do any other wine, asking questions about identity, origins and viticultural practices in ways that we haven't always done in the past. This has undoubtedly benefited the Champagne region as a whole,



Recent vintages

2012 A small crop of excellent wines, combining ripeness and structure

2011 Difficult conditions created uneven wines

2010 A complicated vintage, requiring careful selection

2009 Warm and ripe, giving full, fruity Champagnes

2008 Outstanding wines, featuring both high ripeness and high acidity

2007 An uneven vintage, but some delightful results

Left: Benoît Tarlant and his sister Melanie, the 11th generation at the family estate, pictured with their parents Micheline and Jean-Mary



Champagne Tarlant's Les Crayons vineyard, overlooking the village of Oeuilly

changing the ways in which Champagne is being produced, and influencing consumer perceptions about the region and its wines.

While there will always be a place for traditional négociant blends, this is no longer the only valid model for Champagne. The contemporary appellation is more diverse and dynamic, effectively expanding the definition of what Champagne can be. What follows is my guide to the region's best growers.

Vallée de la Marne Tarlant, Oeuilly

The Tarlant family has been growing vines in the Marne Valley since 1687, and today, Benoît Tarlant and his sister Melanie run this 13ha (hectare) estate in the village of Oeuilly. Benoît is a sensitive viticulturist, working each of his parcels according to its specific needs, and eschewing all chemical pesticides,



Above: Jean-Paul Hébrart is married to Isabelle Diebolt of Champagne Diebolt-Vallois in Cramant

herbicides or fertilisers. Each parcel is pressed and vinified separately, and about half of Tarlant's production is fermented in barrel without malolactic, often with indigenous yeasts. Here in the Vallée de la Marne, the proximity of the vineyards to the river results in broad, full-flavoured Champagnes, and Tarlant's wines combine this intrinsic power with a deft liveliness and finesse. The diversity of soils in this sector also offers a complex array of terroir signatures, which Tarlant explores through several single-vineyard Champagnes such as La Vigne d'Antan, a blanc de blancs made from ungrafted Chardonnay vines, and La Vigne d'Or, a pure Meunier Champagne from a vineyard planted in 1947.

Marc Hébrart, Mareuil-sur-Aÿ

Jean-Paul Hébrart has been in charge of his family's estate since his father, Marc Hébrart, retired in 1997. He works 15ha of vines, most of which are in the sector of the Vallée de la Marne called the Grande Vallée, on the southern flanks of the Montagne de Reims, although he has some Chardonnay vines in the Côte des Blancs. Hébrart advocates sustainable viticulture, avoiding synthetic treatments as much as possible, and he vinifies all of his parcels separately to preserve their distinct identities. While most of his wines are fermented in stainless steel, he began making a barrel-fermented Champagne in 2004, called Rive Gauche-Rive Droite. Hébrart is also a member of the Club Trésors de Champagne, a growers' association that seeks to promote quality wines, and whose signature cuvée is the Spécial Club. Hébrart's Spécial Club is one of the finest available, but his entire range of Champagnes is outstanding from top to bottom, and well worth seeking out. >

Montagne de Reims Chartogne-Taillet, Merfy

Since taking over his family's 12ha estate in 2006, Alexandre Chartogne has emerged as one of Champagne's brightest rising stars.

The village of Merfy, northwest of Reims, is distinctive for its sand and clay soils, and while it has been renowned for its wines since the Middle Ages, it's been largely ignored of late. Chartogne is the sole contemporary champion of this forgotten terroir, and his viticulture aims to express these soils with clarity and precision. He uses organic treatments, promotes biodiversity through cover crops, and encourages deep-root systems through regular ploughing, often by horse rather than by tractor. In the cellar, each parcel is vinified separately with indigenous yeasts, in either oak barrels, stainless-steel tanks or concrete eggs, depending on the individual wine. Chartogne-Taillet's non-

Below left: Alexandre Chartogne was aged just 22 when he took over the family estate

Below right: Benoît Lahaye uses indigenous yeasts and low dosages across his range



vintage brut, called Sainte-Anne, serves as a fine introduction to both the estate and the village, while his series of single-vineyard Champagnes from sites such as Les Barres, Orizeaux and Heurtebise explore Merfy's terroirs in greater detail.

Benoît Lahaye, Bouzy

A passionate advocate of natural winegrowing, Benoît Lahaye has bottled estate Champagnes since 1996. He has been working organically since that time and became certified organic in 2007. He also uses various biodynamic treatments, and he's one of the few growers in Champagne to own a horse, which he uses to plough much of his 5ha estate. Nearly 90% of his vines are Pinot Noir, as befits his Bouzy terroir, and in his hands these create vibrant, complex Champagnes, combining the ripe depth typical of the southern Montagne de Reims with an energy and expressiveness derived from high-quality viticulture. Much of Lahaye's production is fermented in oak barrels, using indigenous yeasts, although his Champagnes are neither oxidative nor overtly oaky in flavour. In fact, they are consistently



slow to develop, typically needing either long ageing or plenty of air upon opening to show their best, yet they're capable of tremendous complexity and intensity, as well as soil expression.

Ploughing at Champagne Chartogne-Taillet is increasingly done by horse, to help soil aeration



Photograph: Theo Bouling



Vilmart & Cie introduced the practice of new oak barrel ageing for its top cuvées



Vilmart & Cie, Rilly-la Montagne

Grower Champagne might appear to be a contemporary phenomenon, but Vilmart has been estate-bottling wine in the village of Rilly-la-Montagne since 1890. Its current proprietor, Laurent Champs, is the fifth generation of his family to make wine here. Champs is a member of Ampelos, an organisation that certifies and promotes sustainable viticulture, and he has used no herbicides or chemical fertilisers since taking over the estate in 1989. He ferments and ages all of his wine in oak: large foudres of up to 5,500 litres for the entry-level wines, and 225-litre barriques or 600-litre casks for his top wines, the vintage-dated *Cœur de Cuvée* and *Grand Cellier d'Or*. Combined with their ripe fruit, this gives Vilmart's Champagnes a creamy depth and complexity, although they also retain a brisk focus and poise, thanks to their avoidance of malolactic fermentation. They tend to be very closed in their youth, needing several years after release to fully reveal their character and aroma.

David Léclapart, Trépail

The village of Trépail is unusual in the Montagne de Reims in that it is planted almost entirely with Chardonnay. Since establishing his 3ha domaine in 1998, David Léclapart has



Above: David Léclapart ferments wines in used barrels from Domaine Leflaive in Burgundy

Left: Laurent Champs took over the estate from his father René in 1990, 100 years after it was founded by Désiré Vilmart in 1890

been making the finest contemporary examples of this terroir. Léclapart is one of Champagne's most vocal advocates of biodynamic farming, having been certified biodynamic since 2000, and with an approach in the cellar governed by the same principles. His entry-level wine, *L'Amateur*, is vinified with indigenous yeasts in enamelled-steel tanks, as he believes that stainless steel imparts a negative energy into his wines. In contrast, the rest of his cuvées are wholly or partially fermented in second-hand barrels purchased from Domaine Leflaive in Burgundy. All of his Champagnes are released without dosage, and all are typically low in sulphur. These are highly individual Champagnes, marked by a striking purity and elegance, as well as a racy tension and savoury complexity derived from Trépail's chalky soils.

Côte des Blancs Pierre Péters, Le Mesnil-sur Oger

Rodolphe Péters is a fourth-generation winemaker at his family's 20ha estate in Le Mesnil. The Péters name is heavily identified with this village, as nearly three-quarters of the estate's vineyard holdings are located here, although only one of its wines – the single-vineyard *Les Chétillons* – is pure Mesnil, with the rest being grand cru blends from the villages of Le Mesnil, Oger, Avize and Cramant. The domaine aims for environmental sustainability in its viticulture, eschewing pesticides and herbicides, and yields are managed through cover crops and regular ploughing. Péters vinifies all of his wines in stainless steel tanks, as he believes that this better retains the original purity and character of the fruit. His Champagnes demonstrate the fine acidity and prominent chalkiness typical of the Côte des Blancs, focusing more prominently on refinement and harmony ➤



Pascal Agrapart runs the family estate with his brother Fabrice



Above: Rodolphe Péters' family is originally from Luxembourg

Top: Péters vinifies all of his wines in stainless steel tanks, to retain the purity of the fruit

than on overt concentration. While they're delicious in their youth, they are also excellent candidates for long ageing, developing a wonderful complexity and depth over time.

Agrapart & Fils, Avize

Founded in 1894, this has become one of the finest grower estates in the Côte des Blancs under its current proprietor, Pascal Agrapart, who has been making wines here since 1984. His 10ha of vines lie largely in the grand cru villages of Avize, Cramant, Oiry and Oger, and while he's uninterested in being labelled organic or biodynamic, he works according to natural rhythms and sensibilities, without any chemical pesticides or herbicides. Agrapart always ferments his wines with indigenous yeasts, which he feels is crucial to the expression of terroir, and a portion of the wines are aged in old, 600-litre oak casks.

His non-vintage cuvées are of uncommonly

excellent quality, while his three vintage-dated Champagnes – Minéral, L'Avizoise and Vénus – all come from specific terroirs in Avize and Cramant, sourced from the same parcels each year. Each has its own individual personality, offering a terrifically detailed and refined expression of site.

Côte des Bar Marie-Courtin, Poliset

Dominique Moreau's 2.5ha of vines are all located within a single parcel in the village of Poliset, in the Aube. She has been making Champagne since 2006, and has also been farming organically since that time, becoming fully certified in 2010.

Typically of this area, most of her vines are Pinot Noir, although a small section of her vineyard is planted with Chardonnay, which she uses to make a blanc de blancs called Eloquence. A cuvée called Resonance is made entirely of Pinot Noir, while Efflorescence is a Pinot Noir Champagne vinified in oak barrels.

Liem's top grower Champagnes to try



Pierre Péters, Les Châtillons, Brut Blanc de Blancs, Côte des Blancs 2007 18.5/20 (95/100)

£54 **Berry Bros & Rudd**
This single-vineyard Champagne comes from Chardonnay vines up to 80 years old in one of Le Mesnil's most renowned sites. While it's voluptuous and complex,

it remains lively and taut thanks to firm acidity and a piercing, chalky minerality.

Drink 2015-2020 Alc 12.5%

Agrapart Minéral, Extra Brut Blanc de Blancs, Côte des Blancs 2008

18.25 (94)

£47 **In Vino Veritas, Vine Trail**

Made from 40-year-old Chardonnay vines in two parcels: Le Champ Bouton in Avize and Bionnes in Cramant, this is rich in depth yet sleek in structure, showing

an elegantly refined texture and long, chalk-infused aromas on the finish. **Drink 2015-2028 Alc 12.5%**



Tarlant, La Vigne d'Or Blanc de Meuniers Extra Brut, Vallée de la Marne 2002

18.25 (94)

£59 **Clos & Cru, Montrachet**

This single-vineyard Champagne comes from a parcel of 60-year-old Meunier vines, and in its velvety texture and generous build, it keenly reflects its

Mame Valley terroir. For all its richness, it remains lively and highly focused, feeling long, complex and complete.

Drink 2015-2020 Alc 12.5%

Chartogne-Taillet, Brut, Montagne de Reims 2008 18 (93)

£30 **Clos & Cru, The Wine Society, Vine Trail**

From the clay-rich vineyard of Les Couarres, this blend of 60% Pinot Noir and 40% Chardonnay combines ripe fruit with zesty acidity. While its intensity of flavour is alluring now, its structure emphasises its suitability for long ageing.

Drink 2015-2028 Alc 12.5%



David Léclapart, L'Artiste Extra Brut Blanc de Blancs Premier Cru, Montagne de Reims, 2007 17.75 (92)

£52 **Clos & Cru**

This comes from 30- to 50-year-old Chardonnay vines in the village of Trépail, and it is always the product of a single harvest (a code on the back label indicates the year). It is partially fermented in barrel, accentuating its complex depth and its lively, chalk-driven finesse.

Drink 2015-2020 Alc 12.5%



Above: Champagne Marie-Courtin's single small plot of vines overlooking the village of Polisot

Both show the pungent depth of fruit and distinctly flinty minerality typical of the Aube, but they also demonstrate a remarkably elegant poise, expressing themselves with a refinement and discreet grace. Another Pinot Noir cuvée, Concordance, is one of a handful of wines in Champagne that is made without added sulphur.

Photograph: Thomas Iversen

Roses de Jeanne, Landreville

Cédric Bouchard has only been making wine since 2000, yet his Champagnes are already among the most sought-after in the region.



Cédric Bouchard uses no wood in his Champagnes

At his tiny Roses de Jeanne estate, named for his grandmother Janika, he produces polished, richly expressive Champagnes that are more Burgundian than classically Champenois in sensibility. Each wine is from a single grape variety, single vineyard and single vintage, involving no blending of any kind.

Like other contemporary, avant-garde Champagne growers, Bouchard focuses on natural viticulture and minimalist winemaking, but he's atypically extreme in his pursuit of low yields, averaging just 4,000kg/ha, which is less than a third of the norm. This creates concentrated, densely flavoured Champagnes that can feel almost like red wines on the palate, and this is accentuated by their unusually creamy mousse, resulting from a lowered pressure (4.5 bars rather than the usual 6). However, the wines also demonstrate an elegant harmony and finesse, and in character they're highly individual, even unique in the region. **W**

Resident in Champagne, wine critic Peter Liem runs the www.champagneguide.net website



Above: Dominique Moreau acquired a 2.5ha parcel of vines, which she named after her grandmother



Benoit Lahaye, Brut Blanc de Noirs, Montagne de Reims, NV 17.5 (91)

£24 **Berry Bros & Rudd, Vine Trail**

Made entirely from Pinot Noir, this is a vivid, energetic Champagne, which shows the power and ripeness of the fruit grown in its south-facing vineyards, while also demonstrating a sophisticated elegance and poise. Its ample, red-fruit fragrance persists with great length, all anchored by chalky minerality. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Aic** 12.5%

Roses de Jeanne, Côte de Val Vilaine, Brut Blanc de Noirs, Côte des Bar 2012 17.5 (91)

£29 **Clos & Cru, Vine Trail**

From a south-facing parcel of Pinot Noir, planted in 1974, this is rich and ripe, with a vibrant, mouthfilling depth of fruit. It's

exuberant without being at all blowsy, and is firmly pinned down by its zesty acidity and stoney, flinty minerality.

Drink 2015-2022 **Aic** 12.5%

Marie-Courtin, Concordance Extra Brut Blanc de Noirs, Côte des Bar NV 17 (90)

£46 **Baron Wines**

This unusual Champagne is made entirely without the addition of sulphur, which seems to bring more vibrancy and vivacity to its fruit, at least in the short term. Made from old Pinot Noir vines, it is complex, energetic and lengthy, with an expansive fragrance. **Drink** 2015-2016 **Aic** 12.5%

Vilmart & Cie, Grand Cellier Brut Premier Cru, Montagne de Reims, NV 17 (90)

£29-£40 **Berry Bros & Rudd, Bordeaux Index, Theatre of Wine, The Vineking**

This blend of 70% Chardonnay and 30% Pinot Noir is vinified entirely in the larger size oak barrels known as foudres, and it's typically a blend of three vintages. Rich in texture yet elegantly carried, and it ages with remarkable grace. **Drink** 2015-2025 **Aic** 12.5%



Marc Hébrart, Brut Rosé Premier Cru, Vallée de la Marne, NV 17 (90)

£34 **TheDrinkshop.com**

Equal parts Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, sourced from Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, this encases its exuberant fruit within a sleek, racy structure, feeling succulently ripe yet imparting an elegant impression, thanks to its silky texture and graceful overall balance. **Drink** 2015-2018 **Aic** 12.5%

For full details of UK stockists, see p89