

Mélanie Tarlant among the vines on her family's 14-hectare estate in the Marne valley

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# A VINE *romance*

BY Edward Docx

Without doubt, 2018 will be a vintage year for CHAMPAGNE – *ELEGANT, COMPLEX* and as close to perfect as an artisan dare dream. Indeed, so sublime was the summer for the region's vines that *MÉLANIE TARLANT* and her brother, *BENOÎT*, finished their harvest two weeks early. Even now, a month later, their excitement is palpable as we drive into the village of Oeuilly – known locally as ‘Tarlant-ville’.

*Mythique* is the word Mélanie and Benoît Tarlant use to describe the vintage. Their parents made the great wines of 1985, 1990 and 1996, and their grandparents those of the late 1950s and early '60s. But this year will surpass all others; 2018, they tell me, will be the first truly great vintage of their watch.

I first met Mélanie 10 years ago while on holiday, travelling in an old van, camping in fields at night and visiting vineyards by day. On a tourist tour in nearby Épernay, I asked one of the big Champagne producers which house they themselves admired. They mentioned Tarlant as a place they respected for its excellence and meticulousness: “they are winemakers’ wines”, they said.

Mélanie told me a story that day and it stayed with me, partly because it was about a road-to-Damascus realisation, and partly because it was a story about vocation, fulfilment and happiness. Mélanie left home when she was 17 and headed for Paris. Her dream at the time was to be a film maker. From Paris, she moved to Edinburgh, then to Morocco. She continued to travel, learning to create storyboards and helping on short films, but the work was intermittent, uncertain, and endless hustle. And then, one day, seven years later, she woke up and suddenly understood.

“I remembered my landscape,” she tells me, as we revisit our conversation from back then. “I remembered the changing seasons, the blue-grey sky that sometimes turned pink and pale red at the end of the evening.” She gestures towards the river Marne and the vine-covered hills all around. She is the twelfth generation of the family here – *‘vignerons depuis 1687’* as it says on the bottles. “I remembered the growing season, the vines, and how my human roots are entwined with the roots of these vines.

“I woke up one morning and I thought, surely the greatest job in the world is to live on a vineyard in Champagne, to live with the seasons, with nature, and to work with the land and the grapes to make something that everybody in the world loves, something that everybody associates with celebration. Why try to become something else?”

And so, aged 25, she came home. “I wanted to speak with my brother,” she says. “The vineyards were being passed to him, and I was the daughter, not the son. So we spoke and Benoît said that we should become a team and take Tarlant into the future together. I was so very happy to hear that. And so here we are.”

Benoît is indeed a winemaker's wine maker: impassioned, ingenious, innovative and touched by the madness of perfectionism. Like Mélanie, he knows every corner of their 14 hectares. In the cellars, he walks among the barrels like some conductor making his rounds of the >

orchestra pit and hearing the music in his head long before the performance is due to start.

One of the basic differences between a producer (sometimes referred to as a *négociant*) such as Lanson or Mumm and a grower-producer like Tarlant is that the former makes Champagne by blending grapes purchased from dozens of different vineyards in the area, whereas the latter only makes Champagne from the grapes grown in the vineyards that he or she owns. Broadly, this has the effect of making grower-producer Champagnes more individual and distinctive, while the big buying producers aim to blend for consistency or uniformity.

From a business perspective, grower-producing has long been a form of economic masochism. Sole-estate grower-producers account for less than two per cent of Champagne sales in the UK and it's much more precarious work. Even when you have got the wine into the bottles, you still have to go out and market it against all the famous marques. But what this means is that the people who do it really want to do it – they're true believers. And they're starting to gain ground.

"We give everything to the vines," Mélanie says. "There are many easier ways to go but we are the resistance," Benoît adds with a smile. "We don't use industrial processes. We are interested in precision."

Precision is indeed their watchword. Together, Mélanie and Benoît make the call as to which vineyard to harvest and in what order. Then they press the grapes – gently, because they want only the central three or four drops of sweetness, otherwise the acidity will be too strong. Then the family blind-tastes the wine from each plot, making their decisions based purely on the nose and palate, on what is ready to be bottled and what stays in oak barrels for a little longer. They create every *cuvée* and curate every vintage.

"We are not trying to change the taste," Benoît says. "Our work at Tarlant is to let the grapes speak for themselves. We don't want a standardised taste. We are trying only to accompany the best of our fruit to the glass."

The grower-producers are proud of this individuality. Tarlant's non-vintage *Cuvée Tradition* (£38), for example, which is their most



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**FROM TOP**  
"Pumping over" or *remontage* adds oxygen to the wine; Mélanie and her brother Benoît check on the vines; the nearby village of Oeuilly is known locally as 'Tarlant-ville'; the bottles are stored on slats in the winery's cellars

traditional Champagne, lists on the label the exact vineyards (the *terroirs*) from which the grapes were harvested. Meanwhile, if you want to be blown away, the Champagne Tarlant Prestige Millésime 2002 (soon to be released, £210) is an astonishing creation – sophisticated, paradoxical, layered, stately and exhilarating all at the same time.

"The land here is millions of years old," Mélanie explains, as we walk back out from the caves where the Champagne is aged. "And maybe you can say that this land has a voice and that this voice is the grapes. Our job is to make them sing." □

*Edward Docx is a prize-winning novelist. His latest book Let Go My Hand, published by Picador, is out now*

Fine Wines & Spirits, Lower Ground Floor

