

quench

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NO PARTY

WITHOUT
CHAMPAGNE



FOR

by Michael Apstein

ALL

OCCASIONS

Though Claude Terrail, the former owner of the legendary Tour d'Argent restaurant in Paris, is reported to have said, "There is no party without Champagne," you needn't wait for a party to enjoy it. That's why I'm writing about Champagne after the Christmas/New Year's holidays, the less-than-one-month-long period in which the vast amount of Champagne is consumed.

Outside of the holiday period, Champagne consumption is usually reserved for special occasions. Sommeliers to whom I've spoken report that at least two-thirds of sparkling wine sales in restaurants appear to be related to celebrations. In comparison, only a trivial amount is consumed at other times.

In reality, Champagne is not just about celebration and holiday parties. Nothing enlivens a simple dinner like the pop of a Champagne cork. Nothing says "welcome" to friends who stop in unexpectedly as that distinctive sound. My advice: always — always — keep a bottle of bubbly in the refrigerator.

Champagne is great with food. Indeed, when in doubt, serve Champagne. It goes perfectly with virtually every dish, from sushi or other crudo to a meaty steak. Even pizza, as Danny Meyer, New York restaurateur extraordinaire, has shown at Marta, where pizza and Champagne are a focus. The bubbles and acidity refresh and invigorate the palate. I've consumed Champagne with pleasure throughout meals featuring everything from the ever-present "small plates" offerings to multi-course tasting menus featuring so-called fusion cuisine to more traditional three-course meals. Indeed, it is the ideal choice for those meals where a plethora of flavours appear on the same table.

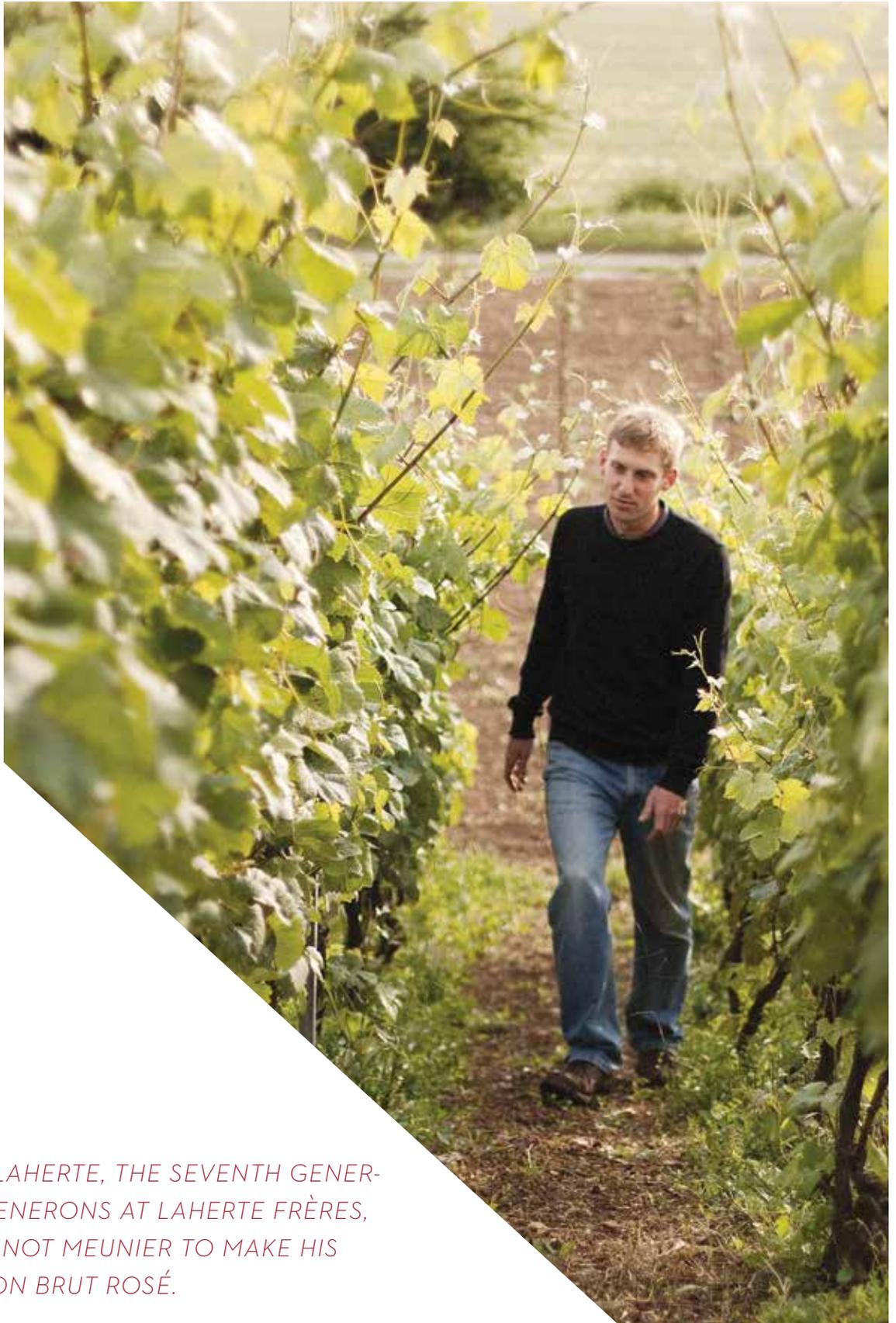
Of course, Champagne is delightful by itself. And you don't need a crowd to enjoy it. All you need is a Champagne stopper. This inexpensive device will change the way you think of Cham-

pagne, transforming it from a "special occasion" beverage to a nightly aperitif. With it, for example, you can spread the cost of a bottle of Pol Roger NV Brut, which is widely available for about \$75, over three nights as you and your significant other each enjoy a four-ounce pour each evening. A Champagne stopper looks like an oversized bottle cap with short wings that clamp under the rim of any bottle of Champagne.

It creates a very tight seal, which maintains the fizz for several days. It's easy to use — both attaching and removing it from the bottle is a cinch. It keeps Champagne fresh and bubbly for at least three days. If, by chance, the effervescence has dissipated before you've finished the bottle, the still wine that remains will prove just the thing for deglazing a pan.

Now that I'm done with my pep talk, let's delve into what's in the bottle.

CHAMPAGNE, LIKE ALL TOP FRENCH WINE, TAKES ITS NAME FROM A PLACE, IN THIS CASE THE EPONYMOUS REGION ABOUT 100 MILES EAST OF PARIS. As is the custom with French appellation origine contrôlée (AOC) wines, regulations mandate which grapes can be used. The red Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier, and the white Chardonnay, alone or in combination, are the primary grapes. (A few other varieties are allowed, but rarely used.) If made entirely from Chardonnay, the Champagne will be labelled



AURÉLIEN LAHERTE, THE SEVENTH GENERATION VIGENERONS AT LAHERTE FRÈRES, IS USING PINOT MEUNIER TO MAKE HIS ULTRADITION BRUT ROSÉ.



Blanc de Blancs. If made entirely from the other two grapes, it will be labelled Blanc de Noirs and be clear, not rosé, since the juice of practically all red grapes is clear. Rosé Champagne comes from pressing red grapes gently to extract a hint of colour.

Champagne starts its life like any white wine — yeast added to grape juice ferments the grape sugar into alcohol and carbon dioxide, which is released into the air. Then, the winemaker blends the white wines made from different parcels, puts the wine into the familiar Champagne bottle, adds a touch more sugar and yeast, and stoppers the bottle. The yeast does its thing — the secondary fermentation — producing a little more alcohol and carbon dioxide, which this time remains in the wine since it cannot escape from the closed bottle. The bottle, now containing dead yeast and dissolved carbon dioxide, ages in the cellar for at least 12 months and usually far longer. This aging on the lees (aka, dead yeast) is critical because it imparts enormous complexity to Champagne, which is why most producers exceed the minimum requirement imposed by regulations. Regulations also stipulate that the secondary fermentation must be done in the bottle, not in a large tank under pressure, as is the tradition for Prosecco, for example. After aging, the bottles are slowly inverted and turned over many weeks to allow the dead yeast to accumulate under the cork, a process called riddling. Next, the neck of the bottle, still inverted, is frozen, encasing the dead yeast in a core of frozen Champagne. The bottle is then turned upright, the cork removed and the core of frozen Champagne shoots out of the bottle since it is under pressure. The bottle is quickly filled with a touch of wine and a little sugar — but no more yeast — and

JEAN MILAN IS LOCATED IN OGER, A GRAND CRU VILLAGE IN THE CÔTES DES BLANCS WHERE VINEYARDS ARE PLANTED ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY WITH CHARDONNAY.

recapped. The amount of added sugar at the end — the dosage — determines whether the Champagne is labelled Nature or Zero Dosage (no added sugar), Brut (less than 12 grams/litre, or one to two teaspoons per bottle), Extra-Dry (12 to 17 g/l), Dry or Sec (17 to 32 g/l), Demi-Sec (32 to 50 g/l) or Doux (more than 50 g/l).

European regulations mandate that no other sparkling wine — such as Franciacorta from Italy, Crémant from other parts of France, Sekt from Germany — can be labelled Champagne even if made by the same method. Since the U.S. does not subscribe to those regulations, California sparkling wines are still labelled “Champagne,” though those produced by Schramsberg, one of California’s top producers, and the subsidiaries of French Champagne firms, such as Domaine Carneros and Domaine Chandon, correctly opt not to use the term.

PRODUCERS CONSIDER THEIR NON-VINTAGE (NV) CHAMPAGNE, DESPITE BEING THE LEAST EXPENSIVE OF THE LINE, TO BE THEIR FLAGSHIP BECAUSE IT REFLECTS THE HOUSE STYLE CONSISTENTLY, YEAR TO YEAR. For NV Champagne, the winemaker blends still wines from the current vintage with still wines from previous vintages (reserve wines), which have been saved in hermetically sealed tanks, to achieve the house style. This blend of wines then undergoes the secondary fermentation.

When the climate produces particularly noteworthy grapes, producers use only those grapes (and no reserve wine) to produce a vintage Champagne. Though the vintage Champagne continues to reflect the style of the house — for instance, Bollinger’s will still be big and bold, whereas Moët’s will be more delicate — it also transmits the character of that vintage. My favourite recent vintages are 2013, 2012, 2008, 2006, 2004 and 2002.

Like other great wines, vintage Champagne develops beautifully in the bottle with age, as exemplified by the 1996 Pol Roger I just had with dinner. Indeed, if you find 2008s still on the market, snap them up if your budget allows because this great vintage is just hitting its stride at 12 years of age.

Monikers like Premier or Grand Cru on a Champagne label indicate the quality of the grapes. The region has a unique — and quirky, I might add — way of determining the quality, and subsequent price, of grapes. Entire villages, not individual vineyards, within the region are ranked and classified. So, for example, if the grapes all came from villages classified as Grand Cru, then the resulting Champagne would be so labelled.

Additionally, most houses produce a high-end Champagne referred to as a Tête de Cuvée. Moët & Chandon makes Dom Pérignon, Taittinger’s is Comtes de Champagne and Louis Roederer’s is Cristal, to name just three. These wines are always vintage Champagne and made only from the very best grapes, most, if not all, of which will have come from the company’s own vineyards. To make most Champagne, the big producers must buy grapes from growers because the vineyards they own don’t supply enough. Though these Tête de Cuvée Champagnes vary in style (Cristal is bolder whereas Dom Pérignon is more delicate), all are exceptional wines and benefit from prolonged bottle aging. The 1990 Comtes de Champagne, at 30 years of age, is still simply gorgeous, robust yet elegant.

JEAN MILAN GRAND CRU BLANC DE BLANCS EXTRA-BRUT NV (\$56)

Jean Milan, which dates its origins to the mid-19th century, is located in the village of Oger, one of the Grand Cru villages in the Côte de Blancs, whose vineyards are planted almost exclusively with Chardonnay. It’s unusual to see non-vintage Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs Champagne, especially at this price. This one is a blend of Jean Milan wines from the 2014 and 2015 vintages and was aged for about 3 years before release. The Extra-Brut designation signifies a very low dosage, 4 g/l. Though quite intense, the elegance of Chardonnay comes through. The spine of acidity keeps it fresh. A fantastic buy!

PIERRE GIMONNET ET FILS 1ER CRU BRUT BLANC DE BLANCS CUVÉE CUIS NV (\$73)

Blanc de Blancs (literally, “white from whites”) has no legal meaning outside of Champagne, where it means that only Chardonnay can be used. The expectation, which is fulfilled dramatically with this wine, is a Champagne of purity and elegance. Gimonnet’s also has a creamy texture, precision and length. Though a perfect summertime Champagne because of its refreshing and light-on-the-palate style, I look forward to drinking it year-round since I have a case in my cellar.

AYALA BLANC DE BLANCS BRUT 2007 (\$107)

Though based in Aÿ, the name of this Champagne house comes from its founder, a Spaniard, Edmond de Ayala. The house has been owned by Bollinger since 2005, but the style of Ayala — fresh and light — couldn’t be more different. At first glance, it seems unusual that Ayala produces a Blanc de Blancs, given its location in Aÿ, a Grand Cru village famous for its Pinot Noir. But they clearly know what they’re doing, since this is a dazzling wine. Creamy and intense, it’s nonetheless light and airy, dancing on the palate. It’s a paradigm of power and elegance. Exceptional length makes conversation pause. Though I’d hate to say \$100+ is a bargain, this Ayala compares favourably with many far more expensive, super-premium bottlings.

LAHERTE FRÈRES ULTRADITION BRUT ROSÉ NV (\$67)

Made entirely from Pinot Meunier, the least noble of the trio of Champagne grapes, this powerful, yet graceful rosé Champagne, shows how that grape, in the right hands, can excel. The Pinot Meunier comes from old vines, which likely explains the wine’s elegance because that grape is more often used to bring fruitiness, not finesse, to the blend. There’s certainly powerful fruitiness — wild strawberry-like flavours — framed beautifully by a straight spine. Barrel-fermentation and aging along with a hefty dose of reserve wines helps explain the power. But it’s the wine’s elegance and finish that makes you pause. Great as an aperitif, it’s also a wonderful choice for the entire meal.