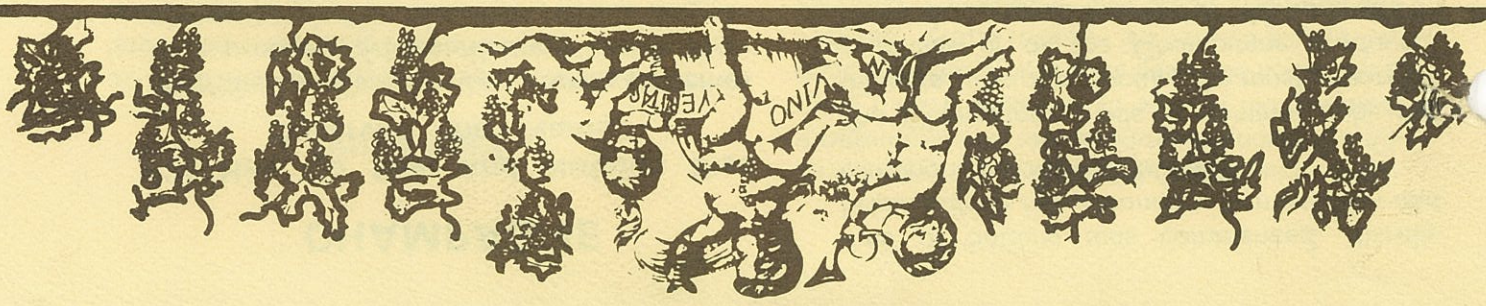


THE UNDERGROUND WINELATTER



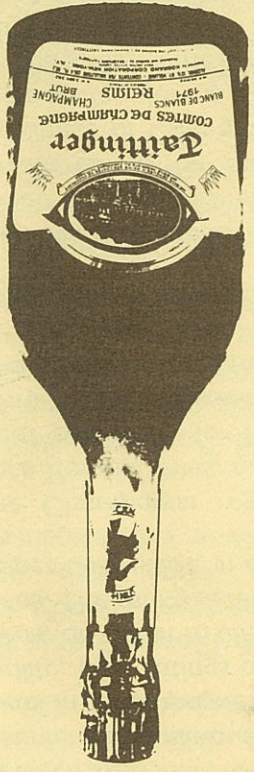
A Definitive Guide to Fine Wines

In This Issue:

- 1 Woes of a Burgundy Drinker
- 2 Champagne
- 7 The Domaine de la Romanee-Conti
- 10 1976 Burgundies
- 12 1977 White Burgundies
- 14 1970 Pomerols
- 16 The Glorious 1975 Chateau d'Yquem
- 16 A Bargain in White Wine

WOES OF A BURGUNDY DRINKER

"Must Consumers Contend With Spoiled Wines as Well?"



the U.S. In fact, some of the bottles of the 1976 Domained Romanee-Conti have shown signs of premature age. Numerous other stories could be related. Perhaps the French feel we do not know the difference and, as a result, they do not take the necessary measures to insure the condition of our wines.

Enough is enough! It is up to us to return to our wine merchants young Burgundies which, while perhaps not spoiled, are flawed from oxidation, brown color, etc. If enough resistance is generated, someone will get the message. Only then will we be insured that we're getting Burgundies that are at their best.

Edward Lazarus, West Coast Associate Editor

What is unsettling is that Burgundy shippers do not seem to be concerned about the care taken with wines shipped to the U.S. For instance, it is said that the Domaine of Romanee-Conti will ship their wines in Europe only during the seasons of temperate climate. However, no such policy exists with regard to their wine coming to

With precious little Burgundy available (in a good year production is only about 10-15% of that of Bordeaux), soaring prices, and many mediocre wines, must we consumers have to contend with spoiled wines as well? Many times we're told a particular Burgundy, or Burgundies in general, drink better on their home soil than in the U.S. Some of this is media hyperbole, but in certain instances there is no question as to the truth of this statement. Without question, most modern day Burgundies are too fragile to withstand the less than ideal storage and handling to which many are subjected.

CHAMPAGNE

"It Has No Peer and Nothing Else Deserves the Name"

All of the world's authentic Champagne comes from precisely delineated areas which begin approximately fifty miles east of Paris. Only the sparkling nectar produced in this region is Champagne. It has no peer, and nothing else deserves the name. The entire area comprises about 80,000 acres, 60,000 of which are currently under cultivation. The major grape varieties are Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and Pinot Meunier. The various townships and vineyard areas in Champagne are rated with regard to quality, with ratings of 100% for the very finest areas, on down to 50% for some of the outlying areas. The rating determines the price which the grapes will realize in any given year.

The Champagne region has produced wine since Roman times, and its wines have enjoyed great popularity for the past several hundred years. The immense current popularity of Champagne in its native country is evidenced by the fact that over 75% of all Champagne produced is consumed in France.

Dom Perignon, who was cellar master at the Abbey of Hautvillers from 1670 to 1715, is considered to be most responsible for the excellence of Champagne as we now know it. The popular story is that it was he who first put the "bubbles" in the wine, thereupon exclaiming, "I am drinking stars!" This is but a myth. Rather he introduced the use of corks as a replacement for the wooden pegs that had been used to stop up the bottles; and, more importantly, he developed the art of blending wines from differing areas of the Champagne region, thus creating a product far superior to any of its parts. Blending continues to this day to be a very important step in the creation of truly fine and distinctive Champagne.

So, then, where did the "bubbles" come from? Natural effervescence was often present in at least some of the Champagne output. This phenomenon was apparently caused by the cold winter climate of the region which retarded the completion of the initial fermentation. A secondary or continued fermentation would occur later, usually in bottle, thereby creating the "bubbles." At some unknown point in time the procedure of adding sugar and yeast at the

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time of bottling was commenced, thereby helping along this secondary fermentation and insuring standardized "bubbles."

The Champagne trade is dominated by the shippers, who manufacture the most important quantities of all the Champagne produced. There are approximately 150 shippers, about thirty of whom can be considered "major" due to either the volume produced or the lofty reputation of their respective concerns. Most of these larger houses own vineyards in the region, but well over 80% of the vineyard area of Champagne is still owned by over 15,000 independent growers who sell their grapes to the shippers or, in some cases, produce and sell their own wine.

Vintage Champagne must come from grapes mostly, but not entirely, from the named vintage year. Non-vintage or undated Champagne can be blended from as many different years as the Champagne maker sees fit, and the end result can be most satisfactory. However, in all fairness, it must be assumed that a higher percentage of the more expensive grapes from the higher rated areas end up in the vintage bottlings. In the final analysis, the quality and nature of any particular Champagne is determined by the blending skill of the Champagne maker and the philosophy of the shipper as to what style of Champagne his house wishes to produce and market. Each house generally releases several different Champagnes, differing by price and supposed quality, and also by the degree of dryness. This dryness is determined by the amount of syrup added to the wine at the time of disgorgement, when each bottle is removed of sediment, topped off and resealed. This procedure generally takes place shortly before the Champagne is to be released by the shipper. The skill and sophistication involved in the blending process cannot be overemphasized. As an example, Paul Krug's Brut Reserve is said to be comprised of 49 different wines.

The question often arises as to when Champagne is at its best age to be consumed. Aside from personal quirks of taste, it would seem that a fairly safe rule of thumb to say that the vintage Champagne currently available is at its peak for enjoyment between seven and twelve years from vintage date. As Champagne ages, at some point it usually begins to take on a maderized flavor, which some people, including

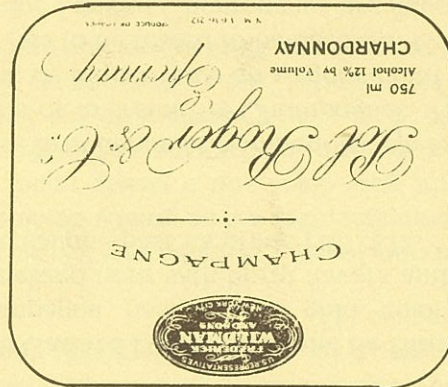
many of our British friends, find quite appealing. On occasion, one runs across an extraordinary bottle of old vintage Champagne from a great year which has been impeccably cellared. Such a bottle can be remarkably good—unmaderized, lively, and possessing a delicious creamy quality which is quite a special treat. However, such bottles are the exception rather than the rule. Certain bottles from such vintages as 1928, 1929, 1945, and 1949 can still be amazingly good. Current Champagne vintages of interest are 1966 (becoming chancey), 1969, 1970, 1971, 1973, and 1975. Some shippers release recently or late disgorged Champagnes of older vintages, which are often quite good, combining the depth and flavor of maturity with the lively sparkle of youth.

Following is a review of currently available Brut Champagnes.

BRUT VINTAGE LIMITED CHAMPAGNES

“The Creme de la Creme”
Outstanding

1971 Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs. Consistently Taittinger Blanc de Blancs represents the pinnacle of elegance in Champagne. The 1971 vintage is no exception. The color is light straw gold with a yeasty nose, delicate almost creamy texture, rich flavor, and a lingering palate impression—near perfection, the standard for Blanc de Blancs Champagnes (19). \$40



1971 Pol Roger Blanc de Blancs. This is a fantastic Champagne with a light gold color and a complex, yeasty nose. The taste shows great fruit and balance. Though not quite as elegant as the Taittinger, still this superb bottle is very rich with a delicious, long finish—an excellent value for one of the very best Champagnes one could hope to drink (18). \$25

Very Good

1970 Laurent Perrier Grand Siecle Blanc de Blancs. The color is light gold with a nice floral nose and a very flavorful, ripe, almost sweet taste; yet the wine is perfectly dry with beautiful balance—a unique Champagne that is consistently first rate (17). \$32

1970 Deutz L.D. Blanc de Blancs. The wine has a very light gold color with a slightly oxidized, yeasty nose. The light, delicate flavor is clean with complexity—good value (16%). \$20

1971 Piper Heidsieck Florens-Louis Blanc de Blancs. This champagne is a light yellow color, with a clean, fruity nose, and a corresponding fruity flavor with elegance and style (16%). \$27

1975 Roederer Cristal. Typically a light elegant Champagne, this bottling has a light gold color and a floral/yeasty nose with nice fruit and very good flavor, but lacking the impeccable balance of the best Crystals (16%). \$42

1971 Deutz Cuvee William Deutz. This is a nice Champagne with a light gold color and good fruit. It is rich and long on the palate with good flavor (16). \$20

1971 Moet & Chandon Dom Perignon. Despite its exalted reputation, Dom Perignon is not the answer in Champagne. This bottling is a good example with a light gold color, yeasty nose, and good flavors. The wine is rich, but a bit harsh. Given the demand, scarcity and price (why couldn't the price be \$100?), leave this to the label drinkers (16). \$44

1971 Chabaut Certificate Blanc de Blancs. This is a nice Champagne with a medium gold color, yeasty nose, and good fruit and richness. Lacking the delicacy of the better Blanc de Blancs, it is overpriced (15%). \$34

1973 Dom Ruinat Blanc de Blancs (250th Anniversary Bottling). This bottling doesn't seem to be as good as other vintages. It has a light gold color and a yeasty nose with a trace of oxidation. The wine is dry and elegant, but not as flavorful as might be expected (15%). \$25

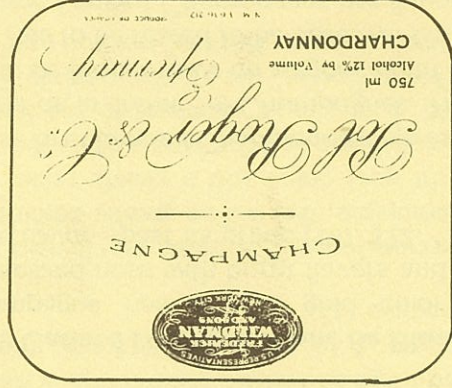
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1971 Pol Roger Private Reserve. A far cry from the superb Blanc de Blancs, this Champagne has a medium gold color and a yeasty nose with good flavor. It is rich, but lacks fruit and is a bit unbalanced and too acidic (14). \$30

1973 Deutz Blanc de Blancs. This wine has a light gold color and a yeasty nose. It is fruity, but a bit flat and austere with a trace of bitterness (13). \$13

1971 Salon Le Mesnil. This is another very limited production Champagne supposedly made only in the greatest years. It's hard to understand what happened with this 1971. It has a gold color and an unusual nose. It is just a bit oxidized with an unusual medicinal flavor that is slightly bitter—not attractive and grossly overpriced (13). \$45

Below Average

1971 Philpinnat Clos des Goisses. This Champagne has a medium gold color and an oxidized nose with vegetative/off flavors that are not appealing (12). \$20

1973 Ayala Blanc de Blancs. The Ayala Blanc de Blancs is rarely outstanding. This vintage has a light gold color and a yeasty nose with good fruit, but is flat, bitter, and lacking charm (11). \$18

1970 Canard Duchene Blanc de Blancs. This Champagne has a light gold color and a caramelized nose with burnt flavors and a sharp citric flavor—past its prime (10). \$12

These Brut Limited Champagnes represent "the creme de la creme" of Champagnes. The finest Blanc de Blancs have an elegance and delicacy that has to be tasted to be believed. Other Brut Vintage Limited Champagnes are flavorful, but lacking the elegance and style of the finest Blanc de Blancs. With Champagne being priced like perfume, the most prestigious labels are expensive indeed. Some are grossly overpriced, yet surely something so superlative at Taittinger is worth whatever one can afford to pay.

1973 Perrier Jouet "Flower Bottle." The bottle is very pretty, but it's debatable as to whether the Champagne or the bottle is responsible for the high price. This vintage has a light gold color with a yeasty nose and good flavor. However, it is quite austere—bottle or no, it's overpriced (15½%). \$42

1973 Veuve Clicquot La Grand Dame. This is another very full bodied Champagne with a gold color and a yeasty nose. There is good fruit with a slightly "earthy" flavor and a touch of sweetness in the finish (15½%). \$27

1970 Bollinger R.D. The wine has a light gold color with an oxidized nose and an intense fruity/caramel-like flavor. Old Champagne fanciers will love this one (15). \$35

1971 Charbaut Blanc de Blancs. The wine has a light gold color and a nice fruity nose with very fresh, clean, crisp flavors. It is probably the best Champagne available on a dollar value basis and very nearly as good as the Charbaut Certificate which is almost three times the price (15). \$13

1969 Krug. Typically one of the most full-bodied Champagnes, it's surprising to find that 1969 is the latest vintage available. It has a medium gold color and an oxidized nose. The flavors are rich, and the wine is still fresh, but lacking the zestiness of its youth (15). \$37

Good

1971 Heidsieck Monopole Diamant Bleu. This Champagne has a light gold color and an oxidized nose, with rich flavors, but a bitter finish flaws the wine—overpriced (14½%). \$35

1973 Mumm's Rene Lalou. Mums top of the line Champagne is rarely outstanding. This vintage is light gold with a slightly green tinge. It has a fresh, fruity nose with a typically austere flavor that lacks fruit (14). \$30

1971 Henriot Reserve Baron. This Champagne is light straw gold color and has a yeasty nose. However, it is a very austere, hard wine with a slightly bitter finish. Lacking the flavor of the bigger style Champagnes and devoid of elegance, the price is ludicrous. Take two barrels of crude oil instead (14). \$50

BRUT VINTAGE CHAMPAGNES

"Some of the Best Values in
Today's Champagne Market"

Very Good

1973 Pol Roger. The Pol Roger Brut lacks the elegance and style of the Blanc de Blancs, yet ranks at the very top among Brut Vintage Champagnes. It has a light gold color and a big, yeasty nose. The flavors are rich with an almost creamy texture. A very lasting, complex finish is also most impressive (17). \$18



1973 Mumm's Cordon Rouge. The Mumm's Cordon Rouge 1973 has a light gold color and a clean yeasty nose. The flavors are clean, but the wine finishes slightly sweet and rather short (14). \$22

1975 Roederer. The wine has very light gold color, and an apple-cider like nose followed by slightly sour character which detracts from the overall quality (13½). \$22

1973 Deutz. The Deutz Brut 1973 is a light gold color and overall is quite attractive except for a slightly burnt taste (13½). \$17

1971 Henriot. This wine is a gold color, with a slightly oxidized quality in the nose. The taste has richness, but there is an off taste that detracts from the overall good flavors (13). \$18

1973 Lanson. The 1973 Lanson has a light gold color and a yeasty nose. It is a light style Champagne with good flavors but is a bit harsh and unbalanced with a slight sweetness in the finish (13). \$20

1973 Laurent Perrier. The 1973 Laurent Perrier Brut is a light yellow gold color with a yeasty, almost smoky nose. The flavors are good, but it is a bit sweet and slightly cloying (13). \$19

1973 Maillay. This Champagne has a light gold color and a yeasty nose with good flavors in a very hard, unyielding style. It lacks complexity and finishes rather short (13). \$17

1973 Philipponat. Again, the 1973 Philipponat Brut is a hard, rather unbalanced wine with good straightforward flavors. Perhaps time will yield more elegance and complexity (13). \$16

1973 Pommery & Greno. The 1973 Pommery & Greno Brut is a light yellow color with a yeasty nose, and crisp, clean flavors, yet it is austere and unbalanced. Again, perhaps time will help (13). \$20

1973 Veuve Clicquot. The Veuve Clicquot shows a light gold color, a yeasty nose, medium body and nice flavors. It lacks the unusual taste of the more expensive Veuve Clicquot La Grand Dame and is much better value (15½). \$18

1970 Charles Heidsieck. The Charles Heidsieck Brut 1970 is a very good example of older Champagne. It has benefited from several years bottle age and shows good complex flavors and richness. A bit short on the finish, it is still very attractive (15). \$16

1973 Perrier Jouet. For those who favor a high acid Champagne, this will be greatly admired. It has a light gold color and a yeasty nose. The flavors are delicate and the wine is quite tart with good acid. It is almost identical to the Perrier Jouet "Flower Bottle," yet a lot less money. After all, how many "Flower Bottles" can you use? (15) \$20

Good

1973 Taittinger. The Taittinger Brut 1973 is nice Champagne that is flawed by a slightly off, oxidized quality in the nose. Otherwise, it is crisp with good flavors in a somewhat austere style (14½). \$20

1973 Ayala. The 1973 Ayala Brut may be more kindly regarded by lovers of old Champagne. For most palates the heavily oxidized quality will render it relatively unattractive. It has a gold color, and a heavily oxidized nose with a slightly caramelized flavor that promises to become even more pronounced with age. Still the wine remains quite hard and lacking in charm (12). \$16

1971 Moët & Chandon Brut Imperial. The 1971 Moët & Chandon Brut Imperial is likewise very oxidized with an almost nutty, sherry-like flavor. The wine finishes sweet (12). \$22

Below Average

1973 Piper Heidsieck. This Champagne has aged prematurely and not very well. It is maderized and has a vinegary quality that makes it immensely undrinkable—very expensive wine vinegar for the ultimate in snob appeal salads! (10) \$22

Overall, none of these Brut Champagnes can be ranked outstanding; yet some of those that are very good must be considered values in today's Champagne market.

NON-VINTAGE BRUT CHAMPAGNE

"What Happened to All the Bargains?"

Very Good

Krug. The price of this bottle is on a par with many Brut Limited Champagnes, yet it is better than most and better than the currently available 1969 Krug Brut. In the case of non-vintage Champagne, the most expensive is also the best. The Krug has a yellow color, and a yeasty nose with just a touch of mustiness. The flavors are rich and intense with an elegance that is rarely found in such full bodied Champagne (16½). \$32

Henriot. Yellow color, yeasty nose, good flavor, richness and balance, an elegant wine with just a hint of bitterness in the aftertaste, this NV Brut is an overwhelming example of why the Henriot Reserve is so over priced (15½). \$15

Moët & Chandon Imperial. Dom Perignon it's not, but many might not know the difference if they didn't read the label. Actually, this Champagne is very good and better than recent cuvees, with a light yellow color, yeasty nose, good fruit and nice flavors, but lacking the richness and complexity to be ranked higher (15). \$16

Good

Laurent-Perrier. Definitely a wine for current consumption, the Laurent Perrier NV Brut has a yellow color with a trace of oxidation in the nose. On the palate the oxidation is just barely discernable, and a fruity taste with good acid balance shows through. Still, it is a better wine than its 1973 vintage brother (14). \$15

Veuve Clicquot. This wine has a light gold color, yeasty/slightly oxidized nose, good fruit, nice flavor, and a trace of oxidation in the taste. It is spicy, slightly bitter, but still quite attractive (14). \$16

Charles Heidsieck. This Champagne has a yellow color, a slightly oxidized nose, with good fruit and flavor and a touch of oxidation in the taste (13½). \$13

Heidsieck & Co. Monopole. Yellow color, slightly oxidized nose, good fruit, clean, and a bit austere, yet, still it is not dissimilar from the Charles Heidsieck NV Brut (13½). \$15

Mumm's Cordon Rouge. This Champagne has a light yellow color, fruity nose, and is clean and fruity on the palate. It has no complexity and is extremely carbonated, still it is a pleasant Champagne (13½). \$16

Phillippinot. The Phillippinot NV Brut has a light yellow color, unusual chemical nose, good flavor with the complexity of older wine in a heavy style—distinctive, but flawed (13½). \$14

deVenoge Cordon Bleu. This Champagne has a light yellow color, a spiciness/fruity nose, and a tart, fruity, slightly sour taste that lacks flavor (\$13). \$15

Mailly Cuvee des Eschansons. This is an unusual Champagne made 100% from Pinot Noir grapes from a Grand Cru rated vineyard. It has a light gold color and an oxidized nose. It is a slightly hot, unbalanced wine that is not appealing at the price (\$13). \$25

Taittinger La Francaise. The current La Francaise cuvee seems to lack the flavor of previous ones. It has a very light yellow color, big bubbles, a fruity nose and clean and straightforward flavors without depth or complexity—not bad, just not much to it (\$13). \$15

Piper Heidsieck. The Piper Heidsieck NV Brut has a very light yellow color and is tart and astringent. Lacking richness, the wine is very short on the finish (12½). \$16

Bollinger Special Cuvee. There's nothing special about this Champagne. It has a yellow color, a spiciness/yeasty, somewhat oxidized nose, and a harshness and touch of oxidation on the palate spoils the fruitiness (12). \$16

Lanson Black Label. The best thing about this Champagne is the price; it recently sold as low as \$6! Beyond that, it has a yellow color, slightly oxidized nose, fruity flavors, without complexity and very straight forward (12). \$9

Perrier-Jouet Extra Brut. Strangely enough the Extra Brut designation seems to mean extra sweetness as this bottle is slightly sweeter than most NV Brut Champagnes. It has a yellow color and an unusual nose, almost like apples. It is clean and pleasant, but has no complexity, a very short finish, and the noticeable sweetness (12). \$17

Below Average

Roederer. Unfortunately, it seems certain that this Champagne was probably better some time ago. Now its definitely past its prime with a yellow color, oxidized, coffee-bean nose, and oxidized, cooked flavors (10). \$15

Overall, the old cliché about NV Champagne being as good as vintage Champagne, better value, etc., seems no longer true. Many of the NV bottlings are too old or have been poorly stored. The consumer has no way to differentiate between a newer cuvee and one that has been around for many years, often under poor storage conditions. Until Champagne producers designate the bottling dates on the label, caveat emptor will prevail. Also, the overall availability of many of the wines seems less than might be expected. What happened to all the bargains?

THE DOMAINE DE LA ROMANEE-CONTI

“Producers of the Greatest Red and White Burgundies”

The Societe Civile du Domaine de la Romanee-Conti is the most prestigious name in Burgundy. The 4½ acre vineyard of Romanee-Conti is probably the most valuable piece of land in the world. In 1760 it was coveted by King Louis XV's mistress, Madame de Pompadour, who was outbid by the King's cousin, the Prince de Conti, whose name it still bears. The present ownership consists of the De Villaine and Leroy families, and the winemaker is Andre Noblet.

Aside from Romanee-Conti itself, the Domaine owns all 15 acres of La Tache, 8½ of the 20 acres of Echezeaux, 11 of the 74 acres of Echezeaux, and leases the 13½ acre Marey-Monge domaine in Romanee-St-Vivant. In 1964 the Domaine acquired 1¼ acres of Le Montrachet, thus enabling it to produce both the greatest white and red Burgundies.

The wines of the Domaine of Romanee-Conti are very special. A unique “oriental spice” quality can often be detected in their bottlings. This has led many people to believe that the Domaine employs a secret vinification technique to achieve this special quality. The Domaine vigorously denies this, claiming that their success is due to the soil and their high standards of cultivation. But one has only to taste their Montrachet, so far superior to all