

The International Wine Review

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Report # 34: Champagne Revisited

Introduction



Every serious wine enthusiast loves Champagne, and we're no different. To prepare for this report, an updated and expanded version of **Report # 9 Champagne**, we traveled to Champagne in September to observe the harvest, taste base wines and finished Champagnes, and meet with the *chefs de caves* of large Champagne houses (Grand Marques), small

grower-producers, and cooperatives. We tasted a wide variety of styles of Champagne and paired them with the sumptuous dishes of local restaurants. We visited the old limestone quarries now used to age Champagne, walked the vineyards where workers were harvesting grapes, and, of course, visited Dom Perignon's abbey overlooking the vineyards at Hautvillers. We visited and tasted the Champagnes of each region as well as the magnificent prestige cuvées blended from across the regions and Grand Cru and Premier Cru villages. In this report, we relate what we learned from this visit and from our many tastings.

The sparkling wines of Champagne are unique in their finesse and refinement while expressing the unique terroir of the region. Chalk subsoils hundreds of feet deep and the cool, wet, marginal climate for growing grapes are the most important elements of that terroir, not replicated anywhere else on earth. Growers face the challenge of coaxing phenolically ripe fruit from these challenging growing conditions, and producers blend base wines from different vineyard plots to make Champagnes of exceptional balance and flavor. The changing climate poses yet another challenge to growers and producers who are increasingly adopting sustainable viticulture practices that limit the use of chemical pesticides, fungicides, and fertilizers while reducing the region's carbon footprint.

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This report looks at the different regions of Champagne, the grapes and the Echelle des Crus system for classifying vineyards. We examine growing conditions and the effects of climate change. In the winery, we take an in-depth look at the *méthode champenoise* and explore recent trends in making Champagne. We explore the diverse styles of Champagne and how best to pair Champagne with food, including an expanded table of recommended food and Champagne pairings, organized by style of Champagne. Finally, we look at the dynamic market for Champagne, including rapidly increasing consumption by the expanding

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middle income countries. Growing consumption in light of constrained supplies should be of interest and concern to all lovers of Champagne who don't have unlimited Swiss bank accounts.

Holiday time is fast approaching, and what better time for Champagne? To help with decisions about which Champagne to purchase, this report includes several tables on the top producers of each major Champagne style and tasting notes and ratings of more than 250 Champagnes. Needless to say, there are many magnificent Champagnes to enjoy throughout the Holidays and beyond. Happy Holidays!

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Mike Potashnik

Don Winkler

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