

Philipponnat

Aÿ le nom, Mareuil le bon is an old Marnais adage, implying that the wines of Mareuil are usually as good as, and sometimes surpass, those of its more famous neighbor. This applies supremely to the great walled vineyard of the village—Philipponnat's Clos des Goisses. Located on the dominant chalk hill of Gruguet, this 5.5ha (13.6-acre) vineyard slopes down at a dramatic angle of between 30 and 45° toward the Marne canal, the vicinity of water providing a natural defense against frost and cold nights. At the summit of the Gruguet, a statue of the Virgin smiles benignly down on Philipponnat's vineyard workers. Their grandfathers built this memorial as a token of thanks that their prayers had been answered and Mareuil saved from bombing during the American air raid of August 11, 1944. Aÿ had less luck; a third of the town lay flattened that night.

The old French word *goisse* signifies a painful task. And vigneron in the *clos* shiver at the thought of working on the hill in early March, when icy rain chills their bones and mires them in mud. That, of course, is the worst-case scenario. Otherwise, this is a dream walled vineyard, unique in Champagne for extent and size, its setting occupying the escarpment created by the river at a strategic point, where the Côte des Blancs, the Grande Vallée de la Marne, and the Montagne de Reims all meet.

The *coteau*, thus created, stretches eastward for half a mile (800m) from the village of Mareuil along the road to Bisseuil. The subsoils are profound, dropping to a depth of at least 330ft (100m) and mostly composed of the purest belemnite chalk. Just as important, the topsoil is thin and poor, which allows the vines' roots to reach the mother-rock with ease, so pervading the wines with an incomparable minerality—always the sign of exceptional Champagne from a top terroir.

Right: Charles Philipponnat at home in Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, and happy to be back in charge of his prestigious family firm

Clos des Goisses is a dream walled vineyard, unique in Champagne for extent and size, where the Côte des Blancs, Vallée de la Marne, and Montagne de Reims all meet



It gets better still. The *clos* faces due south, the soils and vines catching the rays of sun in their full, perpendicular strength, maximizing their warmth and luminosity. What is more, the Gruguet hill provides a shield against the prevailing westerly winds. As a result, during the maturing cycle of the grape, temperatures in the *clos* are on average 2.7°F (1.5°C) higher than in the rest of Champagne, equaling those of Burgundy, 280 miles (450km) to the south. The main aim in the cellar is to give full expression to the power and richness of Pinot Noir, which is so suitable for this terroir, at the same time balancing that Pinot punch with a tempering incisiveness brought by Chardonnay. The great white grape covers some 2ha (5.1 acres) of the *clos*, the dominating Pinot Noir 3ha (7.5 acres).

In the vineyard, there are 14 parcels or *lieux-dits*, with evocative names like La Dure (“the hard one”) and Grands or Petits Cintres—comically, *cintre*, in *argaud*, means coathanger. The grand sites in the warmest and steepest rows are reserved for Pinot, the little ones at the top or bottom of the *clos* for Chardonnay. The average age of the vines is a very respectable 30 years, the yields of grapes laudably restricted, their richness of sugar touching 11% ABV after the first fermentation and 12.5% ABV in the finished Champagne. The 14 parcels are vinified in pairs, so as to produce seven base wines.

Fermentations are conducted 35–50 percent in stainless steel, and 50–65 percent in small (205- or 228-liter) oak barrels that previously held wine for one to six vintages. The malolactic is invariably avoided (by cooling the wine rather than adding extra sulfur dioxide) to preserve freshness. Experiments were conducted with wines other than Clos des Goisses in the 2000, 2001, and 2002 vintages, when they were fermented only in stainless steel but matured in wood (the practice at Krug and elsewhere). But the wines were reportedly a little less complex and a little

harsher. The trend for several years has been to ferment a higher proportion in oak.

It could be argued that the proportion of Pinot Noir in the base wine of Clos des Goisses might be increased to 75 or even 80 percent, for greater complexity and a fuller expression of this fabulous terroir. There need be no loss of balance if, in a flexible frame of mind, a few modern winemaking touches were to be carefully introduced.

None of this diminishes the track record of Clos des Goisses—indeed, vintages have been produced almost every year since 1956, which speaks volumes about this special piece of earth. Warmer years that release the full-on power and succulence of Pinot Noir are particularly impressive, like the honeyed 1976; the sensual, Mocha-like 1989; and the sumptuous 1990, which retains enough acidity to stay fresh into advanced old age. The 1985 Goisses, a small and very intense year for Pinot Noir, sticks in the mind as the centerpiece of a 1996 dinner in Paris, when this majestic Champagne was as perfect with roast woodcock as with a well-aged Tome de Savoie. Certainly, in full maturity (12+ years), the aftertaste of Clos des Goisses is imbued with very characteristic notes of crystallized stone fruits like cherry and mirabelle, even a touch of Kirsch making it a really original partner to roast Cantonese duck with ginger, star anise, and, at a push, plum sauce. The mature, rich Champagne seems to cope better with the spice and sweetness of the dish than a red wine would—even, say, a fine-drawn Burgundy.

On a happy note, after a miserable period under Marie-Brizard, in 1999 the new Boizel-Chanoine ownership asked Charles Philipponnat, then a vice president at Moët, to return and manage the family business. The Clos des Goisses of that year will be a fine, complex wine, decidedly superior to most Champagnes from this easy-drinking but slightly constituted vintage—a good omen.



FINEST WINES

(Tasted in Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, April 2008)

Philipponnat Cuvée “1522” 2000

The best of the blended cuvées, 60% PN, 40% C, all grands crus. Ripe, golden color; subtle, iodine nose. A rich, round, Pinot-led palate, with a fleeting finale of dark chocolate, yet also crisp and mineral. A wine for lobster or scallops. Low *dosage* of 4g/l.

Philipponnat Clos des Goisses 1999

65% PN, 35% C. Elegant, yellow-gold. Although this is a big, powerful Champagne (13% ABV) with certain aspects more like a red wine than a white, there is still a filigree-like delicacy of Chardonnay aromas, with a whiff—would you believe?—of old furniture. Very good weight, balance, and length, with a caressing mouthfeel. Much better than most '99s. 2009–15.

Above: Philipponnat's steep-sloping Clos des Goisses is the source of the first great single-vineyard Champagne

Philipponnat Clos des Goisses 1991

After the big guns of 1989 and 1990, the 1991 shows a return to a more classic and incisive style of Champagne, stressing finesse and subtlety. Evolved scents of smoke and leather, ceding to black cherries and a lovely note of acacia honey. A lithe palate, Chardonnay making itself felt in flavors of lemon and cinnamon. Good finale without being overexpansive. Class—a Champagne connoisseur's Champagne. Ready now.

Champagne Philipponnat

13 Rue du Pont, BP2, 51160 Mareuil-sur-Aÿ
Tel: +33 3 26 56 93 00
www.philipponnat.com