

LOW-DOSAGE CHAMPAGNE BRUT NECESSITY?

Does a spoonful of sugar help the medicine go down?

Michael Edwards introduces a comprehensive, open, round-table tasting of Brut Nature and Extra Brut Champagnes, at which he was joined by **Richard Bampfield MW** and **Tom Stevenson**

Brut Nature, Brut Non-Dosé, Extra Brut... The words chime with the spirit of our time as we look for the natural and unadulterated in everything that we eat and drink. Certainly, low-*dosage* Champagnes are very fashionable just now—at their best, showing the wines in their simple beauty without makeup. It's an attractive idea, but Champagne's marginal climate and good science combine to pose some nagging questions about how palatable such high-acid, minimally sweetened sparkling wines can be for the consumer.

These issues aren't confined to Champagne, of course. In terms of ripeness, or lack of it, they can apply obliquely to other cool-climate wines, such as those of the Mosel and the Rhine at QbA level. Do you remember the late-1980s trend in Germany for bone-dry Trocken wines that made you want to grip the table for support? As Alsace wine grower and scholar Olivier Humbrecht MW observed in 1992, it's like making an apple pie from tart but splendidly flavored cooking apples: You need a spoonful of sugar in the recipe.

Sugar is the issue. If I had forgotten this—my taste buds now conditioned to Brut Nature and Extra Brut



cuvées—it was brought home to me forcefully in Reims recently. At the end of an impressive *vins clairs* tasting of the 2008s, Philippe Thieffry of Veuve Clicquot showed an experimental trial of a Pinot Noir from Avenay in two versions—one chaptalized, the other not. Tasted blind, the chaptalized version was so much better, fresher, and more alive, with the scent of spring blossom.

The science is clear enough. In a finished Champagne, sugar as part of the *dosage* is an activator of the aromas and flavors, allowing them to exhale and fill the glass. This is not to say that moderately dosed Champagnes cannot show

lovely scents and flavors. As Philippe explains, "If the Champagne has a small *dosage*—6 to 8g/l—and is well protected by SO₂ [sulfur dioxide], it will not suffer oxidation. It will show the same bouquet as a Champagne traditionally dosed at 10–12g/l. The difference in sugar is not really significant; it won't affect either the evolution or the taste profile of the Champagne." This is an intellectually honest answer from a senior winemaker at a *grande maison* that has traditionally favored a conventional *dosage*.

At Louis Roederer, *chef de cave* Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon takes an interesting stance on bone-dry/sugarless Champagnes. “For Brut Nature, I am cautious, especially because we have been working, for three years now, on a Brut Nature that should be released by the end of 2010. It is a completely unknown world for us, and we are doing many trials just now. In the past, we have learned, at Roederer, that below 6–8g/l *dosage* you reach an oxidative stage that quickly changes the aromas and fruit of the wine. Below that point, we found our wines lacking the aromatic freshness we are looking for. My anxieties center more on maintaining the Roederer signature than on the aging capacity of the wine itself, about which I have no position today.” All this will make compelling reading for Marne and Aube producers, mainly growers, who are enthusiastic trekkers on the new trail to Champagne in its purest form. Will it open a new page in the wine’s glorious history or be just another passing trend, a dead end?

One thing is clear: You are far more likely to make a successful Brut Nature or Extra Brut Champagne (or, for that matter, a tempting Demi-Sec), if you compose a completely different *assemblage* with a kinder, riper fruit profile than one for a straight Brut cuvée. Much more should be involved than merely adjusting the *dosage* of one base blend.

This tasting of 70 Champagnes revealed big variations in quality and a natural difference of opinion between the tasters. No style of Champagne is more a matter of personal preference than this near-sugarless category. I suppose because I have spent so long with growers over the past year while researching a new book, I am supportive to the point of indulgence, cheering them on to find adventurous, purer flavors in Champagne.

I think the panel did agree overall that the Extra Brut category (0–6g/l *dosage*) was generally more palatable than the so-called Brut Nature, Brut Zéro, or Non-Dosé range (0–3g/l *dosage*), some of which I suspect had a touch of residual sugar, if not *dosage*, in their makeup. We could also agree that the blanc de blancs, the pure Chardonnays, were the most challenging and difficult in this category, but when they were successful, they were spectacular, particularly in the case of two young winemakers in Le Mesnil and Vertus—Christophe Constant (J-P Vergnon) and Emmanuel Fourny (Veuve Fourny)—who have fashioned wines close to the greatness of white Burgundy, with bubbles, in the hot vintages of 2002 and 2003.

The whole *dosage* debate will run and run. In 20 years’ time, if climate change accelerates, the landscape of Champagne and its changing wines could be dramatically different from what they are today.

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Conclusions and highlights

At this tasting, two very successful contenders were the Brut Natures (blanc) from Ayala and Pol Roger. The initial launch of Ayala’s wine had been based on the exceptionally ripe 2002 vintage, a majority of the two Pinots and a third of Chardonnay, all sourced from fine vineyards averaging 93 percent on the *échelle des crus*. This Champagne was a huge success by the glass in London restaurants—so much so, that the current base wine is younger and really dry, for those who like an austere bite.

Pol Roger, in a complete departure from the style of its much-loved White Foil Brut (still one of the best), has quite rethought the blend for its Nature: younger wines of primary fruitiness, less reserve wine, and lots of Meunier (34 percent) rounding out the palate in a Champagne that Tom Stevenson lauds for its fullness and perfect balance—quite something from an expert not in love with the Brut Nature concept.

Official style categories in Champagne

Brut Nature, Brut Zéro, Non-Dosé: 0–3g/l *dosage*

Extra Brut (“Extra Raw”): 0–6g/l *dosage*

Brut (“Raw”): 0–15g/l *dosage*

Extra Sec (“Extra Dry”): 12–20g/l *dosage*

Sec (“Dry”): 17–35g/l *dosage*

Demi-Sec (“Medium Dry”): 35–50g/l *dosage*

Doux (“Sweet”): 50–150g/l *dosage*

Flight 1

Brut Nature NV

Ayala Zéro Dosage Brut Nature NV

Ayala Cuvée Rosé Nature Brut Nature NV

Pol Roger Pure Brut Nature NV

Mandois Brut Nature NV

Larmandier-Bernier Terre de Vertus

Premier Cru Blanc de Blancs Brut

Nature NV (Non-Dosé)

Tarlant Zero Brut Nature NV

TS: These first six wines were quite impressive. The Ayala Zéro Dosage had toasty aromas, full yet dainty balance, and a fresh finish. It was balanced but could take a *dosage*. The Ayala Rosé is normally one of my favorites, but it was a touch *maderisé*, with almost a taste of *dosage*, probably from the age—it was disgorged in September 2006. One of the problems with this and other low-*dosage* wines is that you need a certain amount of age after disgorging before you release it, but a long time on second cork does not really help it. I love aging on second cork, but I only want it when it's as smooth as possible. I don't like *maderisé*. I liked the Pol Roger very much—a lovely wine that has freshness and finesse, a fullness in the mouth. A perfect Brut Nature because of its balance, satisfying and classy. The selection works very well. If you have a wine intended for Brut, it doesn't necessarily work for Brut Nature. The Mandois had a richness on the finish that suggested a *dosage*. It was very successful, as were the Larmandier-Bernier and Tarlant. The Larmandier was ultra-fruity, definitely tasting *dosé*! Probably some 2003 is in the blend. A touch of lactic creaminess on the finish increases the perception of *dosage*. The Tarlant was fresh, fruity, and zippy—a delight to drink now. All

work for me. The oak and acidity dry out the wine. I find it very bold and enterprising but I would not choose to drink it, though I am impressed by it. The combination of oak and acidity is a bit too austere.

ME: I greatly admire the Ayala Zéro Dosage. I think the wine is less ripe than when it was first released two or three years ago, when the base wine was 2002. I find the acidity really quite strong here. Excellent wine, but it doesn't quite have the level of ripeness for a Zéro Dosage. I like the Rosé, too, with that bit of extra age. I'm not going to write *maderisé*, but it's certainly oxidative! Quite Burgundian, too, with hedgerow fruits and *sous-bois* and a very good integration of fruit, vinosity, and acidity—an excellent food wine. The Pol Roger has a marvelous verve and purity about it, and it is completely different to White Foil. I liked the Mandois. He has 30 percent Meunier in this wine, but it lacks a bit of class. The Larmandier is an absolute knockout—a great example of a Vertus terroir wine. It has a marvelous naturalness to it, very Larmandier-Bernier. Zero *dosage* works perfectly here.

TS: I agree.

ME: Tarlant is a brilliant winemaker, but his vineyards are on the south bank of the Marne, facing north, so he has a problem getting maturity. But overall this was a very good flight. Not wines of general appeal, though.

Flight 2

Brut Nature NV

Tarlant Rosé Zéro Brut Nature NV

André et Michel Drappier Pinot Noir Zéro

Dosage Brut Nature NV (Sans Souffre)

Veuve Fourny & Fils Blanc de Blancs Vertus

Brut Nature NV

Laherte Frères Blanc de Blancs Brut Nature

NV (Non-Dosé)

the village, where the best wines come from. It has a marvelous poise and balance, as well as being classy. Laherte is an unusual producer from the top of the Cubry Valley though he does have vines in the Côte des Blancs. It has a very distinctive character that I don't associate with the Côte des Blancs: a pithy, lemony character. I like it because it has lots of character and is quite different from the usual style of blanc de blancs. Raymond Boulard's wines I didn't like quite so much. The Tradition Brut Nature is broad and quite oxidative, probably oak-influenced. I much preferred the Cuvée Réserve Brut Nature—another big wine, with lots of personality. A very good flight, with the wines at exactly the right temperature, which is very important.

RB: The Tarlant Rosé I also preferred to the white—full-bodied, not especially dry, attractive fruit, lovely balance, a touch of bitterness on the finish, but successful. I found the Drappier very weird, reminding me of Alka Seltzer, and somehow slightly crude for a Champagne, but surprisingly concentrated. I wondered what he'd done to make it stable in the absence of sulfur... The Veuve Fourny was quite exciting but needs to settle down a bit—lively and very fizzy, with mouth-watering, high acidity. Laherte was very Burgundian, very Meursault-like, with oak most apparent on the palate, which has a drying and bitter effect on the finish but plenty of flavor and character—it comes down to personal preference. The first Boulard wine was very up-front, reminding me of a Chilean Chardonnay or Chablis, but too sharp at present. The second was totally different, very flowery and fat, tasting high in alcohol. It didn't have the precision of really top-class Champagne.

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these wines were successful, but really they need to be drunk on purchase.

RB: I thought the Ayala Rosé was pretty successful, achieving a good balance, whereas the Pol Roger was fine and delicate, but its youthfulness gave it a high-acid edge that I didn't enjoy so much. There was something quite curious about these wines... I quite like Champagne and its *joie de vivre*, but I wonder if some of these wines were lacking that. Mandois had plenty of character, but the piercing acidity was hard to take. Larmandier had a lovely sweetness at the front of the palate and didn't taste too dry. The Tarlant doesn't

Raymond Boulard Tradition Brut Nature NV

Raymond Boulard Cuvée Réserve Brut Nature NV (Zéro Dosage)

ME: Another good flight but very different styles here. Tarlant Rosé is racy, brisk, and fine, with an excellent balance of fruit and acidity. The Drappier is a fine expression of Aubeis Pinot Noir, jam scents of plum and quince—but I don't mean jammy! I don't know how long it will last, not having been sulfured. I think that it's a wine for gastronomy. Veuve Fourny is another fine Vertus producer, from the eastern side of

TS: I feel like David Bowie's Major Tom because I'm on a different planet to Michael and Richard... If I was married to Michael, we'd have to split the cellar! He would have all his wine, and I would have all mine, and then we would have no arguments! For me, this flight was as disappointing as the first was exciting. The Tarlant Rosé was my joint highest score, though by my standards these were pretty low scores. Almonds on the nose and a simplistic fresh-fruit palate. Perfectly okay but not special. I wonder how Drappier can get away with no sulfur. Maybe it's because with autolysis reducing enzymes, you don't need so much sulfur,

though it can be a problem with too much sulfur. This has never lived up to the first release of the first cuvée, but it is fresh and has a Pinot Noir structure. But contrary to Michael, I find very little Pinot Noir on the palate. I couldn't be farther away from you on the Veuve Fourny. It was amy and simplistic—no joy at all. Laherte has too much oak, too much technique, and not enough wine or terroir. Francis Boulard is a very nice guy, he's very enthusiastic, and I'm always trying to find a wine of his that I like, but for me the Tradition was pure strawberry

ME: I agree with that very much. I was also very disappointed with it. Dull and rather confected, and it doesn't really taste like Zéro Dosage—I suspect that there might be some residual sugar in the wine. Not of the level I expect of L-P Ultra Brut. They need to do something radical with it. The Boulard Blanc de Blancs started very well, with a very nice mousse. But the end flavor showed overripe apples, almost aldehydic, which I didn't like. The Cuvée Rosé Brut wasn't badly corked, but I didn't give it a mark. A pity there isn't a replacement... The Grand

Flight 4

Ultra Brut NV

Nicolas Feuillatte Brut Extrem' NV

Devaux D de Devaux Ultra Brut NV

H Billiot Fils Cuvée Laetitia Brut NV

Bonnaire Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Brut Non-Dosé NV

Varnier-Fannièrè Brut Zéro Grand Cru NV

TS: The Nicolas Feuillatte Brut Extrem' is a wonderful wine now. Toasty rich, coconuty, crisp, zingy acidity. It must be 1996-based. It has complexity, vivacity, and finesse. Next

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overlaid by lactic creaminess, particularly on the palate. The perfumed strawberry aroma of the Cuvée Réserve then became quite full and yeasty, then aldehydic. This is a fast-forward glimpse of how the wine will develop. From the palate and finish, it doesn't need *dosage*, but without one this will not live.

Flight 3

Brut Nature/Ultra Brut NV

Raymond Boulard Blanc de Blancs Brut Nature NV (Zéro Dosage)

Raymond Boulard Cuvée Rosé Brut Nature NV (Zéro Dosage)

Raymond Boulard Grand Cru Brut Nature NV (Zéro Dosage)

André Clouet Silver Grand Cru Brut Nature NV

Lenoble Brut Nature NV (Dosage Zéro)

Laurent-Perrier Ultra Brut NV

RB: Of the final three Boulard wines, I found the Blanc de Blancs Brut Nature NV the most successful and characterful. Good flavors on the attack, with an attractive balance of acidity and dryness. The Cuvée Rosé Brut was corked. The Grand Cru Brut Nature was a bit too edgy. There was good material—a serious wine with plenty of flavor—but is it what we would choose to drink? The fizz unbalances. Until I got to the André Clouet, I was beginning to conclude that blanc de blancs was the style most suited to Brut Nature. But I thought this was fantastic. It has less bitterness than most of the Pinot Noir-based wines, a bracing attack on the palate, and good sweetness of fruit while remaining dry. I found the Lenoble a bit shorter than some of the others. The Laurent-Perrier I found dull. Every time I taste this, I wonder, What's the point? I don't quite get it. A very dry, austere style but just no fun.

Cru Brut Nature is mainly Grand Cru Maily grapes and is much better as a Brut. I completely agree with Richard about the Clouet. A beautiful, exuberant expression of Bouzy fruit. The *dosage*, or rather lack of it, was absolutely perfect. I was mildly disappointed with the Lenoble. Very well-made wine, but it didn't seem to have much character to it.

TS: The last Boulard wines were reasonably good. I could enjoy one glass of the Blanc de Blancs at the table, but the aldehydes would prevent me from requesting a top-up. I agree that the fizz unbalances the Grand Cru. The problem is that it will not be a better wine by the time it has softened up. But it had good Pinot fruit and structure, with only a brief glimpse of aldehydes on the aftertaste. Another good food wine, to drink on purchase—but only one glass for me. One of the main characteristics of these low-*dosage* wines is aldehydes. André Clouet makes either outstanding wines or, sometimes, the aldehydes get in the way. I like the Silver, but for me the aldehydes linger, though the fruit hides them well. The Lenoble didn't require *dosage* if consumed on purchase. The ripeness hints at sweetness. A smooth evolution so far. I have always tried to find positive aspects with the Laurent-Perrier. It was always the favorite wine of Alain Terrier [the former *chef de cave*]. When I first picked it up—bang!—the sulfur hits you. But that will go toasty. It's already quite toasty on the palate and comes out in the glass, but it lacks a certain finesse. L-P was the first to do the zero-*dosage* style in the 1800s.

RB: You wonder if they ever benchmark this wine against its rivals and taste them alongside each other.

TS: Michael is absolutely right in that they need to do something. I would put a very fresh Chardonnay into the blend in an attempt to lift it a bit.

was the Devaux, which had ripe Pinot fruit dominating. It suffers coming after the Brut Extrem'. Not a bad bottle. The Cuvée Laetitia works without a *dosage* but is not classic or complex. I liked the Bonnaire very much. It was my second favorite wine of this group: rich, well structured, with a good minerality of fruit and a long, crisp finish. An excellent wine but, like others, to be drunk on purchase and will not necessarily get any better than it is now. The Varnier-Fannièrè is almost sweet, despite no *dosage*, and simple. It would be better with a *dosage* and some post-disgorgement aging.

ME: I agree—and I think you could say that about some of the other wines! I don't naturally associate the mellowness and roundness of Brut Extrem' with Brut Nature, but it's a very good Champagne that gives a lot of pleasure.

TS: I think it has 2g/l of unfermented sugar.

ME: That wouldn't surprise me. I agree that the Devaux is a well-made wine, but it lacks complexity and is much simpler. I liked the Billiot very much—a complex wine of finesse and power, typical of Ambonnay. I've always liked Bonnaire's wines and this Blanc de Blancs was very good indeed. Minerality, freshness, and exemplary balance.

TS: I could have written that myself!

ME: Oh, good! I see your point about the touch of sweetness with the Varnier-Fannièrè, with its ripe nose.

RB: The Nicolas Feuillatte is in a crowd-pleasing style, opulent and hedonistic, not too dry—in fact, not that dry at all. There are other wines here that are finer. Devaux has really attractive fruit and sweetness, and again it does not appear too dry. The acidity is a bit tart, and overall it's a touch simple and not that complex, but decent. Billiot was interesting: very lifted and perfumed, really odd and confected, sweet and sour. Bonnaire was my highest score yet (18). I

wrote, “lifted Chardonnay aromatics,” which I’ve never put before!

TS: He is prone to leave a deliberate amount of VA, but as long as you don’t see it as VA, it’s okay. If you see it as VA, it doesn’t work.

RB: I found the Varnier-Fannière a bit too fizzy, which grates against the high acidity. A bold, in-your-face style that lacks balance. Do you think it will age?

TS: I think it needs a bit of *dosage*.

RB: It’s a question of balance, which for me it lacks at the moment.

ME: As a conventional Brut, it would be much more fluid.

Flight 5

Extra Brut NV

Gosset Célébris Blanc de Blancs Cuvée

Extra Brut NV

Claude Cazals Cuvée Vive Extra Brut NV

Marie-Noëlle Ledru Ambonnay Grand Cru

Extra Brut NV

Boizel Brut Ultime Extra Brut NV

Tarlant Cuvée Louis Extra Brut

Veuve Fourny & Fils Cuvée R Vertus Extra Brut NV

ME: An interesting flight. I must say that I like Extra Brut as a style more than Brut Nature.

TS: I agree.

ME: It starts off very well with the Gosset Célébris, a complex blend of four vintages, long and complex. I believe the Cazals Cuvée Vive is based on 2001 or 1998? It’s oxidative. Marie-Noëlle Ledru is a lovely lady of Champagne, with marvelous vineyards in Ambonnay. The wine is quite generous and *gourmand*. Boizel is toasty but vegetal on the nose, and I’m not sure it works on the palate. The second bottle of Tarlant Cuvée

Veuve Fourny and the Tarlant. I agree that the first bottle of Tarlant was oaked but was corked. I’m not that sensitive to cork, so I scored it highly but thought the second bottle was even better. A thrilling style, packed with flavor and character. Fantastic—sweet, oaked, oxidative, so long. The oak gives it such conviction. For a Champagne, it’s a very concentrated style but brilliantly done. The Veuve Fourny was like sparkling Montrachet.

TS: I wrote, “Meursault with bubbles!”

RB: Incredible finesse, fabulous richness of flavor, balanced oak, sweet fruit, but a dry finish of great length. Absolutely top class. That is the one I would love to see in a few years’ time. Both this and the Tarlant have the potential to age.

ME: Veuve Fourny’s winemaker, Emmanuel Fourny, has spent quite a lot of time in Burgundy.

TS: I don’t think there’s much disagreement on this flight... I scored three wines very highly. The Gosset was mature, complex, yeast-aged, white and yellow fruits. Lovely, supple structure, definitely a food wine. The second bottle of Cazals showed aldehydes because it was warm, but I don’t think they would show if it was at the proper temperature. Correct, with true Nature rawness. Although austere now, if the Ledru had a higher *dosage* and more post-disgorgement aging it would be a great Champagne of potentially impressive complexity and finesse. The second bottle of Boizel would also be much better with *dosage*. Tarlant is rich, lean, and, for an Extra Brut, mellow. It definitely has class. A lovely wine, especially for its modest provenance—it’s not even a premier cru! The Veuve Fourny was glorious. Delicious citrus fruits

RB: The Pannier was nice enough but simple and fat. I thought it was attractive, not too dry—in fact, it comes across as a Brut. De Sousa confirmed my view that blanc de blancs is best suited to the low-*dosage* style. Really exciting, very fine, very elegant, a delicious glass of Champagne. Unlike the Cuvée 3A, where again the bubbles were too prominent. It lacks balance. Laherte was a bit soupy and a bit clumsy, tasting like an experiment! De Saint Gall was really interesting. For me, it had some of the character of the Laurent-Perrier Ultra Brut but with more vigor, freshness, and fruit. Really good—and so appetizing. Some minerality, and overall very successful. The Barnaut didn’t quite work for me. It wasn’t totally clean and there was something a bit edgy about it.

ME: I think that Pannier, which is a cooperative quite close to Paris...

TS: In the way that Oxford is close to London!

ME: It’s not a great wine but very well made and would give pleasure to a lot of people. I like De Sousa but was slightly disappointed with Cuvée des Caudalies. The 3A had more life and vigor and I preferred it, though Caudalies is supposed to be the superior wine. The Rosé de Saignée was not too extracted or too big and works better than Laherte’s Blanc de Blancs. The De Saint Gall was an exemplary expression of the Côte des Blancs. I have always been a fan of Barnaut, but this is not his best wine.

TS: The Pannier was well balanced; good structure, length, and smooth development. I can see what you mean about the biscuit note, Richard, but the vanilla note on the finish elevated it above that, and overall was pretty good. I didn’t like the De Sousa

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Louis shows lovely, controlled oxidation through oak. I marginally preferred it to the Brut Nature—more harmony and quite refined. A good flight overall.

RB: I thought that this was a superlative flight and gave my highest marks so far. The Boizel didn’t work. The Ledru and Cazals were very good wines in the context of the tasting, and I enjoyed them both, but they were outgunned by others. The three best wines all scored highly with me but for different reasons. For me, the Gosset was about supreme harmony. Rich, honeyed, but also precise and elegant. It doesn’t matter if it’s dry or sweet—it just works. Beautifully done. Then a total contrast between the

underpinned by the effects of oak rather than the unwelcome aromas of oak. That was the best flight so far.

Flight 6

Extra Brut NV

Pannier Extra Brut NV

De Sousa Cuvée des Caudalies Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut NV

De Sousa Cuvée 3A Extra Brut NV

Laherte Frères Les Beaudiers Rosé de

Saignée Vieilles Vignes Extra Brut NV

De Saint Gall Blanc de Blancs Premier Cru Extra Brut NV

Barnaut Grand Cru Sélection Extra Brut NV

Caudalies. The high-toned aroma is not attractive. The 3A was better, if not terrific. Very fruity, tastes more like Brut than Extra Brut, but smooth development. I didn’t like the Rosé, as you would probably have guessed! It was let down by its oxidative aroma. But I did like the De Saint Gall. In a wine show, Tony Jordan would give this a gold, but I would be pushing for a silver. I like it, but it’s not top-top-top. Barnaut was lactic-toasty and sour. No, thank you.

Flight 7

Extra Brut NV

Egly-Ouriat VP Grand Cru Extra Brut NV

Duval-Leroy Extra Brut NV

Dumangin Extra Brut NV
JL Vergnon Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru
Extra Brut NV
Doyard-Mahé Carte d'Or Blanc de Blancs
Extra Brut NV
Mailly Grand Cru Extra Brut NV

TS: For me, Egly-Ouriet has potential, but theoretical top-top quality is spoiled by the under-*dosage*. Duval-Leroy tastes freshly disgorged and is fine, elegant, and balanced. I was pleasantly surprised by the Dumangin, which was characterful and nicely balanced. An attractive wine to drink

RB: I kept going back to the Doyard—a very concentrated style of Champagne. Very interesting and very rich. The Leclerc-Briant was yeasty and cidery, rather simple and commercial. Comte Audoin de Dampierre tastes a bit worked, lacking the natural balance of the best. Lots of fizz, but it doesn't actually taste all that dry to me.

ME: I marginally preferred Doyard-Mahé to Doyard. Rich and concentrated wine, very good. I have never got on with Leclerc-Briant—the wines are rather slight in my opinion. The Comte is a good expression, with nice, creamy autolysis.

Agrapart & Fils Minéral Extra Brut Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru 2004
Agrapart & Fils L'Avizeoise Extra Brut
Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru 2004
Laherte Frères Millésime Prestige Brut
2004 (5g/l)
Laherte Frères Les Vignes d'Autrefois Extra
Brut 2004
Larmandier-Bernier Vieille Vigne de Cramant
Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut 2004

ME: Quite a varied flight, I thought. There were some good points but no real high point. Agrapart is interesting because he

“The Prévost was high-toned. I do not like it” **Tom Stevenson**
 “I *do* like the Prévost, but it's a very particular style” **Michael Edwards**
 “I have never thought of myself as an aficionado of oaked Champagne, but in this Prévost it works reasonably well” **Richard Bampfield MW**

on purchase that has some finesse. Not great wine, but good. Vergnon was very rich, with lovely intensity. Excellent and satisfying wine. Doyard-Mahé showed class, finesse, and elegance. To get this length with this light balance and structure is exceptional. A beautiful wine. There was a mere hint of amylic aroma on the Mailly that will blow away in a few months. Light, elegant, and delightful.

ME: I agree about Egly-Ouriet. Somehow it doesn't quite work out.

TS: He has a great reputation.

ME: Duval-Leroy has great purity. Dumangin is a very good, harmonious wine, great finesse. Vergnon is someone I discovered quite recently, and I think he's a future star. Very good, and someone to watch. Doyard-Mahé is very good, a benchmark. The Mailly is good without being great.

RB: I agree that the Doyard-Mahé was excellent, a terrific wine. Real intensity of flavor, great length, highly convincing. The Vergnon has great potential. It's very young, has a citrus-cream type palate and great core and grip. The first time I have ever used the word “amylic” in a tasting note was for the Duval-Leroy! Plenty of fizz, good depth of flavor, not too dry, quite commercial, but pleasing and long. The Egly-Ouriet I found quite complete. Sherry notes, lovely definition on the palate, really precise, masses of flavor, and it doesn't really matter how dry or sweet. But that was a really good flight.

Flight 8
Extra Brut NV
Doyard Cuvée Vendémiaire Extra Brut NV
Leclerc-Briant La Ravinne Brut NV (5g/l)
Comte Audoin de Dampierre Blanc de
Blancs Extra Brut NV

TS: I liked the Doyard very much: a Champagne of class and substance. The Leclerc-Briant was aldehydic, coarse, and—dare I say it?—over-*dosé*. Comte Audoin de Dampierre has such precision for a toasty, mature Champagne. I liked it very much.

Flight 9
Brut Nature/Non-Dosé 2006 and 2005
Jérôme Prévost La Closerie Les Beguines
Brut Nature 2006
Philipponnat Royale Réserve Non-Dosé
NV (2005)

TS: Prévost was high-toned, like the De Sousa Cuvée des Caudalies that Richard found herbal. I do not like it. But I liked the Philipponnat, a solid, well-structured, Pinot-dominated blend. Good food wine.

ME: I *do* like the Prévost, but it's a very particular style: pure Meunier aged in wood. I didn't like early vintages, which I found very beery and yeasty, but it is getting better, and I think he's a very brave grower. The Philipponnat had nice, natural flavors.

RB: For me, it is a question of whether the oak adds complexity or not to the Prévost. I have never thought of myself as an aficionado of the more oaked styles of Champagne, but in this Prévost style it seems to work reasonably well. Very dull on the aroma for the Philipponnat, but the palate is lively and exciting, so maybe it needs to develop a bit. Promising.

Flight 10
Brut Nature/Extra Brut 2004
Agrapart & Fils Vénus Brut Nature Blanc
de Blancs 2004
Georges Vesselle Brut Zéro Grand Cru
Millésime 2004
Jérôme Prévost La Closerie Les Beguines
Brut Nature 2004

bottles separate parcels of his vineyards in Avize, Cramant, and elsewhere. Both the wines here have a *gras* quality of fruit, but I preferred L'Avizeoise, the most complete of the Agrapart range, with weight and poise. What I like about Agrapart is that he is like Selsosse and likes his stars, but he is much more sparing in his use of wood and uses it better. They are extremely good wines without being great. Vesselle I haven't tasted for a long time but thought this had quite a lot of class. Prévost I didn't like nearly as much as before and found this very oxidative and foursquare. Laherte Frères Les Vignes d'Autrefois has real complexity and interest. Vieille Vigne de Cramant is the best wine by far, real naturalness, vinosity, and length. Too young, though!

RB: The Agrapart Vénus was quite unconventional... Notes of cider, mouth-filling, very young, but masses of flavor. The Minéral had amazing legs for a Champagne, which made me wonder if it had slightly higher alcohol. It lacked a bit of grip on the palate, particularly compared to L'Avizeoise, which was very Burgundian and really classy. Vesselle was a very good example of a wine where the raw material has carried the zero *dosage* effortlessly. The oak is too dominant with Prévost. Laherte Frères Millésime was also a bit too oaky—the oak seems to have smothered the wine's other characteristics. But Les Vignes d'Autrefois was very good, though it seemed to have some sweetness, and it was hard to believe it was Extra Brut. The Vieille Vigne de Cramant had a vegetal character with an amazing sweetness of fruit, and it tasted quite sweet in this context. But very high class.

TS: I disagree with my esteemed colleagues on this flight! I didn't find it as varied as you.

(per se)

For me, the Vénus was slightly high-toned, with lovely acids and a smooth finish. Pity about the high tone. I didn't like the Georges Vesselle wine. Aldehydic aromas shouldn't be in a wine of that youth, but it has lovely rich fruit and very good acids. After that, the flight becomes very good. I didn't like the previous Prévost, but this one had sulfur, then toasty-lemony oak. I liked that very much. I couldn't separate the two Agraparts on points, but I could on character. Minéral has bags of gentle, soft fruit underpinned by a firm mousse. Lots of length, some complexity on the finish. L'Avizeoise was just delicious—long and elegant. I found the first Laherte wine an intensely flavored Champagne of great potential complexity. Les Vignes d'Autrefois was another incredibly rich wine and needs some time to develop aromatics. But for me, the very best wine of this flight was the Larmandier-Bernier, which just has the edge over the previous pair. It has the same great intensity, but great minerality as well. A terrific flight—I was really pleased. And 2004 was the largest vintage Champagne has ever had! They use it as an excuse to justify large crops...

ME: I agree!

Flight 11

Brut Nature 2003

JL Vergnon Confidence Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Brut Nature 2003

TS: Vergnon is rich and a tad fat—more indicative of the year. There are some wines made in 2003 that could have benefited from being acidified, if it was done well.

RB: Ledru didn't have the intensity or grip of the very best but was amazingly primary for a 2002. It's a seven-year-old wine but smells as if it was made a couple of months ago.

TS: Brut Nature wine often produces aldehydics. Following the oxidative shock of disgorgement, all low- and no-*dosage* Champagnes mature in a more aldehydic, less graceful, way than they would otherwise have done had they received a regular Brut *dosage*.

RB: That's probably it... Ayala was really good at first, but it doesn't have the precision of the very best wines. It's a bit more seductive and evolved than the others at the moment. Vergnon was excellent, with great freshness, fruit, and balance, but it needs time to develop complexity. Boulard was very intense, almost too concentrated, and it seems a bit forced to me. Gimonnet and Veuve Fourny were both quite outstanding. The Fourny was youthful on both sight and aroma, lively and refreshing, so appetizing, really top class. Gimonnet was also very primary, with an intensity of flavor, while remaining precise, pure, and elegant. Youthful but outstanding. I'd drink these now, but I'd love to see where they might go. Really top wines.

ME: I prefer Ledru's older wines to this, which was still taut and fine, a *gourmand* style. The Veuve Fourny is quite lovely, Burgundy in champagne, though richer and less mineral than the previous wine. Vergnon shows minerality, purity, and subtle richness. Boulard was really fine. The Gimonnet had lovely fruit.

TS: I suppose there are some of these that you like and I don't... For me, the Ledru was

ME: What I like about 2002 as a vintage is its wonderful cleanness.

TS: The best wines are very restrained.

Flight 13

Brut Nature/Extra Brut 2000/1999

Jacquesson Avize Grand Cru Brut 2000 (3.5g/l)

Roger Pouillon et Fils Millésime Grand Cru Extra Brut 2000

Pannier Egérie de Pannier Extra Brut 2000

René Geoffroy Millésime Extra Brut 2000

Marie-Noëlle Ledru Ambonnay Grand Cru Brut Nature 1999

Tarlant La Vigne d'Or Blanc de Meuniers Extra Brut 1999

ME: An interesting flight, with some variation, but good on the whole. I have tasted Jacquesson Avize 2000 before, and I like this wine. It has real grip and character. It was a ripe year, and the 3.5g/l *dosage* seems to work very well. Since then, Jacquesson has gone on to single-vineyard bottlings, by which I'm less convinced. Roger Pouillon was very well balanced—a good wine without being great. A typical 2000, with lots up-front. Pannier was fine. The only wine I had some reservations about was René Geoffroy, whom I greatly admire as a grower, but somehow his Cumières vineyards don't work in the Extra Brut category, lacking definition. Ledru's '99 is more or less *à point* now, drinking better than the 2002—very *gourmand*. I didn't find any aldehydic notes here. The Tarlant is pure Meunier but works very well.

TS: Jacquesson showed floral-maderized aromas. Very good acids, it needs time, but

“I like Jacquesson Avize 2000. It has real grip and character. It was a ripe year, and the 3.5g/l *dosage* seems to work very well” Michael Edwards
“I liked it very much but preferred Pouillon, which has very good aging potential. Even with its low *dosage*, it has finesse” Tom Stevenson

ME: Great minerality and length, though today I marginally prefer his Extra Brut.

RB: Interesting aromas, good balance for '03, real vigor and persistence.

Flight 12

Brut Nature/Extra Brut 2002

Marie-Noëlle Ledru Ambonnay Grand Cru Brut Nature 2002

Ayala Perle d'Ayala Brut Nature 2002

JL Vergnon Confidence Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Brut Nature 2002

Veuve Fourny & Fils Blanc de Blancs Vertus Brut Millésimé 2002

Raymond Boulard Les Rachais Extra Brut 2002

Pierre Gimonnet & Fils Oenophile Extra Brut 2002

oxidative and aldehydic. A pity, because this would be a very good wine if it was properly dosed.

ME: That's a good point...

TS: You liked the Ayala, and I would agree with that—toasty, full, smooth, rich, and satisfying. But rich and satisfying doesn't necessarily mean complex! The Confidence Blanc de Blancs is a lovely wine spoiled by having no *dosage*. I liked Fourny, but not as much as you. Brut or Extra Brut, I wondered (5g/l maximum, according to Charles Fourny). Definitely well balanced, so the question is moot. Smooth, rich, and elegant for the weight. The oak is a touch high-toned on the Raymond Boulard. Pierre Gimonnet is pure class! A blend of mineralities, it has such finesse. Beautiful.

the acids are strong and would have benefited from a proper *dosage*. I liked it very much but preferred Pouillon, which has very good aging potential. Even with its low *dosage*, it has finesse. I found the Pannier's nose lactic-toasty, but this was converted totally on the palate to crème brûlée, with a healthy whack of acidity. Great wine, co-op or not! René Geoffroy was lemony, with exotic fruits to follow, and excellent acids. Great now; better in the future. With the Ledru, I didn't like the aldehydic-*maderisé* aromas, but it had some floral finesse and great acids. Bags of flowery autolysis and acacia with the Tarlant.

RB: A terrific flight. Jacquesson smells of pure marzipan, which persists on the palate. Richly flavored and very good, but perhaps

too concentrated for some. I really enjoyed Roger Pouillon, whom I hadn't come across before. The aromas lacked precision, but the palate was terrific, fresh, pure, and bright. I can confirm that Tom's lactic is my egg with the Pannier! Really good fizz and freshness on the palate, biscuity and mature. René Geoffroy's Millésime was lovely. It could be a white Pessac-Léognan! Rich, sweet, and very flattering, with lovely freshness. For me, the Ledru was too much of a caricature, reminiscent of malt whisky and a bit dry on the finish, too. The Tarlant was fantastic. Lovely sweetness on the

great vigor on the palate, fresh and flavorsome, terrific length. Paillard was mature, a touch soapy, with little definition. It doesn't taste too dry... In fact, there is quite a lot of sweetness but not complexity. The Billecart is fantastic now, but you wonder where it might still go. Jacquesson is my joint highest score with the Veuve Fourny. Relatively pale for an '88, lovely aromas of crème caramel, asparagus, and malt whisky. Really serious—a *vin de meditation*. You just want to sit down with a glass and enjoy it. I'm a bit of an '88 groupie, and this is very special.

more successful than Brut Nature. But can we draw any conclusions on how to produce a wine that is palatable with no or very little sugar? For me, it has to be either a Non-Vintage wine that has a relatively short period on lees—like the Pol Roger Pure—but that includes some mature reserve wines in the blend to make it mellow enough to work with no or low *dosage*. Or, for a Vintage Champagne, it has to be kept on lees longer than normal, and the base wine for the topping up has to be something exceptionally fresh and crisp, like a blanc de blancs, perhaps. The idea is either to

“It has to be either a Non-Vintage wine that has a relatively short period on lees but includes some mature reserve wines to make it mellow. Or, for a Vintage Champagne, it has to be kept on lees longer than normal, and the wine for topping up has to be exceptionally fresh” Tom Stevenson

palate, really fine, good balance, oxidative Sherry notes, fresh and mature—delicious. I don't know if the oak regime there has been consistent over the past ten years, but in this wine it is there, but not dominant as it was in the other vintages. Delicious wine.

Flight 14

Extra Brut/Zero Dosage 1997–1988

Bollinger RD Extra Brut 1997 (disgorged March 2008)

Bruno Paillard Nec Plus Ultra 1995 (disgorged October 2006)

Billecart-Salmon Le Clos Saint-Hilaire 1995

Jacquesson Dégorgement Tardif Brut 1988 (Zéro Dosage)

ME: With the Bollinger, it is like giving an electric shock to a very old lady: not a good idea! With relatively little post-disgorgement aging, it lacks the harmony and richness of the Grande Année. It tasted very lean in 2008.

TS: Absolutely stunning at the moment—and Grande Année is even better, but you can't get it! But of course it is not recently disgorged and has had some post-disgorgement aging. Nec Plus Ultra is a fine wine that would have been even greater with more *dosage*. I can't believe that this is the original disgorgement of Clos Saint-Hilaire [disgorged in 2003]. It's absolutely delicious, with great finesse; a lovely Champagne, but I reserve my highest mark of the tasting for Jacquesson—textbook complexity and finesse!

ME: Paillard was a big Champagne, but it lacks the pure, *airien* quality of the '99. The Billecart is much better than when it was first released but is still not as good as the '96.

RB: Bollinger has everything you want:

Conclusions

TS: Back in the 1990s, the average grower was adding something like 12–13g of residual sugar per liter for Brut wines. Now, it is 10–11g/l on average. For special or gastronomic cuvées, it is 6–8g/l. The warming effect of recent years is creating grapes with higher pH levels, which is encouraging lower *dosage*. I think that just lowering the *dosage* is a simplistic and knee-jerk reaction. There are other things that can be done to counter low acidity. Wines can be acidified in Champagne every year without permission, whereas in Bordeaux you must have permission. Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon at Louis Roederer does it quite a lot. He's very good at it, but most producers aren't very good. About 99 percent of wines go through malolactic to some degree; so if it keeps getting warmer, will 99 percent *not* go through malolactic? Whatever your position is on climate change, there is definite evidence of warming in the Champagne area specifically. It was 14-point-something in the 1950s and 15-point-something in the 1990s. It is expected to be higher for the 2000s. They have to look at vineyards. The best sites now were judged as such when it was a cooler region, so maybe some areas might have to be reclassified.

RB: There would be an economic impact to that, too, of course.

ME: Harvests have got earlier and earlier.

TS: Often when I have criticized here, I am criticizing the *dosage* level rather than the wine itself. How long do you leave low-*dosage* wines after disgorgement? That's the problem...

RB: There were more standout wines in the Extra Brut category.

TS: Personally, I think that Brut is more successful than Extra Brut, and Extra Brut is

introduce a certain maturity to an essentially fresh wine, or to inject some vitality into a Champagne that has mellowed on its lees. The rationale behind both these suggestions is to achieve a smoothly aged component essential for consumption of a low-/no-*dosage* Champagne upon purchase, before the oxidative impact of disgorgement spoils these poorly protected wines with overly aldehydic aromas. It is not an easy task, and it is even more difficult to replicate with any consistency.

RB: I found the younger wines less successful. And I have come away from this tasting with a much greater knowledge of these styles. And I enjoyed it much more than I thought I would! With the really good wines, I wasn't conscious of whether they were sweeter or drier. At best, Brut Nature can be so much more exciting than mainstream styles.

TS: It's not just about having no *dosage*, however. A lot of other work has to be done—and a lot of thought given to which vineyards and which vintages to use.

RB: For me personally, the Chardonnays seem to work best.

ME: I would generally agree with that—or rather, I wouldn't disagree with that! ■

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