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Jérôme Prévost Les Béguines 1999–2007

by Peter Liem

The sleepy village of Gueux, well off the beaten path southwest of Reims, might not seem to be an obvious birthplace for a cult Champagne. Over the past decade, however, Jérôme Prévost has rapidly become one of the new stars in the Champagne firmament, creating wines of a highly individual personality and intense expression that are eagerly snapped up by those fortunate enough to have access to them.

Prévost does not come from a family of winemakers. He began tending vines in 1987, when he inherited from his grandmother a vineyard that had been rented out. For the first ten years he sold all of his grapes to the *négoce*, but in the 1998 vintage his friend Anselme Selosse convinced him to begin producing his own wine, and he even offered to loan him some space in his cellars in Avize, since Prévost had no cellars of his own. Prévost pressed and vinified all of his wine there until 2002, when he constructed a new cellar at his La Closerie estate in Gueux.

Production is tiny—currently about 13,000 bottles a year—and as with a number of other avant-garde producers in the region, Prévost's

methodology often contradicts the conventions of Champenois tradition. His Champagne is never blended, always coming from a single harvest, as well as from a single vineyard, a 2ha (5-acre) parcel of 40-year-old Pinot Meunier vines in Gueux called Les Béguines. While he doesn't claim to be working organically or biodynamically, he farms entirely without chemical herbicides or pesticides, and his work in the cellar is all done according to natural rhythms. He harvests at a high degree of ripeness in order to avoid chaptalization, and fermentation takes place with indigenous yeasts in 450- to 600-liter oak barrels. The wines are usually bottled around July, with minimum quantities of sulfur and without fining, filtering, or cold stabilization.

Prévost releases his wines unusually early, preferring post-disgorgement aging to extended aging on the lees. "Lees aging is like food for the wine," he says. "It nourishes the wine, but it's only after disgorgement, after the exposure to oxygen, that the wine is released into its real life." Because the wines are typically disgorged and sold about two years after the harvest, well before the three-year minimum of lees aging required for vintage-dated Champagne, they never carry the vintage on the label, even though they're always made from a single year. They are marked, however, by a small code near the bottom of the label that reads "LCxx," with xx representing the year—LC06 meaning 2006, for example. In general, all of the wines are released as Brut Nature, but in 2001 and 2006 they were labeled Extra Brut, containing a mere 2g of dosage per liter.

While Prévost typically produces only one wine per vintage, he has made a few exceptions. In 2000, he produced a second Champagne called Une Fois Pour Tout, which was the same wine as Les Béguines except that it was aged in barrel for an additional year before bottling. This wasn't intended to be any sort of special selection; indeed, Prévost chose the barrels for this cuvée at random, simply as an experiment to see the effects of longer aging on the

base wine. He did this again in 2003, keeping a portion of the wine in barrel and bottling it two years later under the name d'Ailleurs. "This was to introduce more oxidation into the wine, because it had a closed, tannic character," he says. More recently, Prévost made 3,000 bottles of a rosé Champagne for the first time in the 2007 vintage, using low-yielding Pinot Meunier vines in Les Béguines that were affected by *court-noué* for the red wine and blending this into the Les Béguines blanc. Although satisfied with the result, he's already thinking about how to improve upon it. "Making white wine and red wine are two completely different worlds," he says. "I'm still learning."

In March 2009, I tasted the following wines in Prévost's cellars in Gueux. While it was Prévost's intent to provide a full vertical spanning his entire career, we were unable to taste the 1998 because he no longer has any bottles left. The two wines from 2007 are still aging *sur latte* and were disgorged for this tasting. They will be released at the end of 2009.

2007 Les Béguines (disgorged à la volée)

The apple fruit is unusually rich in texture for the vintage, though it's driven by a fierce acidity that makes this feel intense and severe. This is youthful and nervy, needing time to settle down.

2007 Les Béguines Rosé (disgorged à la volée)

Elegant and floral, this shows a silky, expansive fragrance and outstanding length, with surprising delicacy and finesse for pure Pinot Meunier rosé. An impressive debut, feeling much more open and accessible right now than the 2007 blanc.

2006 Les Béguines

A seamless combination of power and finesse, this shows a fine tension and poise, with unusually savory hints of verbena and tobacco leaf under the rich fruit. It feels complex and complete, and this has the potential to be one of Prévost's finest efforts so far.

2005 Les Béguines

This wine has been awkward ever since it was first released, contrasting a full, creamy richness with smoky, herbal, and even bitter undertones. It has evolved very slowly over the past two years and seems to require at least another two.

2004 Les Béguines

Just beginning to blossom, this is lithe and zesty, backed by the lively acidity of the vintage. It's gained an even greater elegance and harmony after more than two years of post-disgorgement aging, feeling fresh, vibrant, and soil-driven.

2003 Les Béguines

Broad-shouldered and extrovert, this is unusually assertive, showing a spicy, brothy depth. It remains impeccably balanced despite its weight, particularly on the long, richly flavored finish.

2003 Les Béguines d'Ailleurs

Compared to the *classique*, this is more complex, with even greater length, but it also feels more burnished and patinated, with the oxidation from extra barrel aging clearly felt. It's equally bold and densely flavored, but in a distinctly different style.

2002 Les Béguines

I sorely underrated this wine when it was released at the beginning of 2005. Four years later, and from the same disgorgement, it's at a lovely point of drinking, balancing floral, citrusy freshness with a generous and confident complexity. Its refinement, graceful balance, and sense of completeness make it stand out even in this crowd.

2001 Les Béguines

Outstanding for the vintage, this is fully resolved without being overly mature. There's a surprisingly deep richness for an '01, underlined by accents of honey, almond, and quince. Very few Champagnes reached this level of expression and intensity in this wet vintage.

2000 Les Béguines

I've always felt that this is Prévost's finest release to date, and this tasting hardly changes my viewpoint, though the 2002 presents a strong argument. Today, this is remarkably fresh and vibrant, with vividly detailed flavors and a palate-staining presence. Superb precision, dimension, and persistence of aroma on the finish.

2000 Les Béguines Une Fois Pour Tout

While this wine was excellent in its youth, today it feels much more oxidative than the regular release and distinctly less complex. It does show a full body and good length, but it's a little past its prime.

1999 Les Béguines

This is ripe and round without feeling blowsy, showing the low acidity of the vintage while remaining focused. It's fully mature now, its flavors veering toward dried fruit and citrus peel, and while it's not as complex as other vintages, it finishes with surprising length.

Right: Jérôme Prévost at home in Gueux

