



DRINKS

Picking the Best Grower Champagnes

Corks and opinions flew at the first
BLOOMBERG MARKETS panel tasting.

BY ELIN McCOY



WEALTH

EARN, INVEST, SPEND



THESE CHAMPAGNES EXHIBIT MORE-DISTINCTIVE PERSONALITIES BECAUSE THEIR TERROIR ISN'T SMOOTHED OUT BY BLENDING.

Only chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier can be used to make champagne, either alone or in combination. The region's more than 300 villages have an astonishing diversity of soils. Grower-producers' champagnes exhibit more-distinctive personalities because their grapes come from a single village or several contiguous ones, and their *terroir* consequently isn't smoothed out by blending.

Even the smallest grower-champagne makers offer a range of bottlings, from nonvintage *brut* to rose, to prestige *cuvée*. Given our self-imposed price limit of \$75, most in the tasting are the bottom-rung, basic, nonvintage *bruts*. Happily, current releases have a large proportion of grapes from the great 2008 harvest.

Rather than skinny celebratory flutes, we use large, tulip-shaped Bordeaux-style glasses because they better show off aromas. We check the bubbles in each glass first. The tinier, more numerous and more persistent they are, the better the champagne. In between flights, we discuss what we've tasted, trying to nail the character of each wine. We toss around phrases

► **BUBBLES FIZZ GENTLY IN DOZENS** of wine glasses. Four opinionated tasters had smiled approvingly at No. 1, but controversy breaks out over No. 6. "A tasty, creme brulee-like crowd pleaser," Josh Green says, giving it a solid three stars.

"Pink lemonade with too much fruity sweetness," counters Raj Vaidya, panning it with zero stars. Robin Kelley O'Connor finds whiffs of cinnamon and flowers, while I savor its creamy texture. We both write down two stars.

We're at the first ever **BLOOMBERG MARKETS** panel tasting on a late July afternoon in New York. It's 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius) outside, but we judges—and the 15 grower champagnes we're tasting blind—are staying cool in an air-conditioned boardroom at the Penn Club. A couple of hours after we start, I tally our scores, and we remove the bottles from their shiny gold bags. Two bubbly are the clear winners, while a third qualifies as the tasting's best value.

Made by small producers from grapes grown in their own vineyards, these champagnes are nicknamed "farmer fizz." "Every one is different; this is a great representation of the huge range of grower styles," Vaidya, head sommelier at Daniel, says after we polish off the third flight of five wines. Vaidya, 31, knows his bubbles. At dinner each week, the restaurant sells about 350 glasses of champagne.

"Nothing is cookie-cutter, styles are clear-cut and there are no duds," says O'Connor, who's head of wine, Americas, at Christie's in New York.

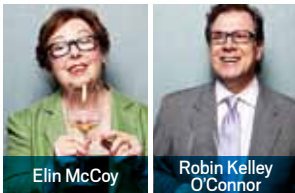
Green, our non-wine-professional judge, says, "They have more texture, dimension and minerality than the big, well-known brands." The 41-year-old founder of New York-based Raven Capital Management LLC learned to love wine in the mid-1990s as a Eurobond trader at Merrill Lynch & Co. in London, where client lunches always started with bubbly.

Compared with the 200-plus *Grandes Marques*, such as Moët & Chandon, which each pump out millions of bottles a year, the Champagne region's several thousand grower-producers are tiny, rarely making more than 10,000 cases. The big brands own few vineyards, instead buying grapes from a hundred or more sources and blending them to create a house style.



Josh Green

Raj Vaidya



Elin McCoy

Robin Kelley O'Connor

HOW WE JUDGED

The champagnes were tasted blind in flights of five. They were purchased at four New York wine shops after setting a price range of \$35 to \$75.

THE FIVE CRITERIA

- Look:** Size and quantity of bubbles, color
- Aroma:** Enticement, fragrance, complexity
- Taste:** Flavor, balance, texture, complexity
- Finish:** Length and aftertaste
- Overall Quality**

ANDREW HETHERINGTON



THE WINNERS

★★★

Cedric Bouchard Inflorescence Blanc de Noirs Val Vilaine Brut (\$55) Creamy, bright and elegant, with aromas of white flowers and tastes of candied lemons and slate. The finish goes on and on. Green called it “a food champagne.” O’Connor found notes of “*tarte tatin*.”

Vilmart & Cie. Grand Cellier Brut Premier Cru (\$72) Racy, complex and seamless, with intense aromas and flavors of lime zest and chalk, a silky texture and a wonderfully mouth-filling finish. Vaidya praised its pure minerality, while O’Connor savored its bounce and energy.

THE RUNNERS-UP

★★★

Laherte Freres Brut Tradition (\$39) **BEST VALUE** A blend of mostly pinot meunier with a toasty, fruity-spicy, easy-drinking character. Three of us rated it three stars; Vaidya wasn’t as impressed.

Jose Dhondt Blanc de Blancs Brut (\$52)

Egly-Ouriet Brut Tradition Grand Cru (\$68)

★★

Agrapart & Fils Les 7 Crus Brut Blanc de Blancs (\$39)

A. Margaine Cuvee Traditionelle Brut Premier Cru (\$43)

Camille Saves Brut Carte Blanche (\$50)

Pierre Gimmonnet & Fils Selection Belles Annees

Brut Premier Cru Blanc de Blancs (\$39)

Tarlant Zero Brut Nature (\$45)

★★

Chartogne-Taillet Sainte-Anne Brut (\$40)

H. Billiot Fils Brut Reserve Grand Cru (\$59)

Larmandier-Bernier Terre de Vertus Premier Cru (\$60)

★

Thierry Massin Selection Brut (\$47)

★★★ Outstanding

★★ Very good

★ Recommendable, attractive

such as “bright lemon meringue,” “fresh-baked cinnamon rolls,” “burnt caramel” and “ham glaze.”

To balance champagne’s tart acidity, producers typically add a dosage of sugar, which can mask any mineral taste. The latest trend among independent *vignerons* is ultradry, no-dosage fizz, which can strike some as too edgy and sharp.

Our winners show the differences you find among growers. Rising star Cedric Bouchard began making his unusual single-vineyard, single-grape, single-vintage champagnes 10 years ago. The one we tasted is all pinot noir from a tiny parcel of vines in the Cote des Bar district and all from the 2008 harvest, with no dosage added.

Vilmart & Cie., a family firm for generations, has gained a cult following during the past 20 years for rich, full, chardonnay-dominated *cuvees* from its limestone vineyards in two neighboring villages in Montagne de Reims. The Grand Cellier Brut Premier Cru, a blend of three vintages, has about 20 percent pinot noir and was aged in big oak casks.

There were a couple of negative surprises. The 2005 L’Aubry Le Nombre d’Or Sable Blanc de Blancs (\$72) smelled like wet dog, a sure sign it was corked. (Later, I scored a follow-up bottle 2½ stars.) And I’m usually a big fan of all-chardonnay Larmandier-Bernier Terre de Vertus, but our bottle tasted a bit flat, as though it had been subjected to high heat in a warehouse.

Green says he still starts off client lunches and dinners with champagne but avoids expensive showoff names such as Dom Perignon. “My clients today are obsessed with value and taste,” he says. “They’re not interested in breaking the bank, so these grower champagnes are perfect.”

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