

CWW Visit to Champagne October 2016



*The Comité Champagne (previously known as the CIVC) invited a group of 12 CWW members based outside the UK to Champagne. Much to the participants delight, the trip concentrated on highly-renowned and experimental smaller producers, but the group also visited a historic cooperative and the oldest Champagne house of them all. The trip took place from 3rd-5th October 2016. Photos by **Matt Wilson**, except where otherwise stated.*

Champagne and its many colours

DAY ONE

Winifred Bowman sets the scene with the opening morning's introduction at The Comité Champagne in the heart of Epernay

Champagne is synonymous with success, celebration, love and opulence, so says Philippe Wibrotte, public relations officer of the The Comité Champagne (previously known as the Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne or CIVC).

Our host, The Comité Champagne is the trade association that represents the interests of both independent Champagne producers (vignerons) and Champagne houses. It promotes the vines and wines of Champagne through: economic;

technical and environmental development; continuous quality improvement; sector management; marketing and communications; and the promotion and protection of the Champagne AOC across the world.

The Romans planted vines in the Champagne area, and with the development of the town of Reims, vast quarries of chalk were dug out to build the town. Later these *crayères* would become the now famous wine cellars. Wine production started in the third century.

Effervescence is an effect that has always been observed in wine. The first recorded mention is found in an Egyptian papyrus document dated 23rd October 522AD. Fast forward and the arrival of sparkling Champagne wines in the period 1670-1690 marked an entirely new departure in the world

of wine. Not only were they the first-ever sparkling wines to be tied to a specific region, but they also pioneered a very specific winemaking technique. The English Restoration dramatist Sir George Etherege is the first to mention sparkling Champagne wines, in his comedy of manners, *The Man of Mode* (1676). Within just a few years, Champagne wines were all the rage in England, with the French following close behind in the 1700s.

The Champagne appellation represents 34,000 hectares (ha) across 320 wine villages or 4% of France's total vineyard area and the industry directly employs 30,000 people. Champagne exports its wine to more than 190 countries, representing 13% by volume of the world consumption of sparkling wines.



Morning mist over the Champagne vineyards.

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Cover photograph: Cédric Moussé of Champagne Moussé demonstrates his disgorgement skills. Photo by **Matt Wilson.**

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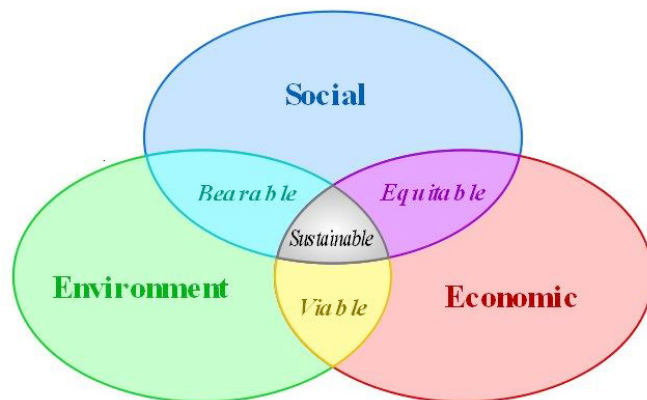
At present there are 15,000 winegrowers and 300 champagne houses with an annual production of 312,531,444 bottles (€4.75 billion annual turnover). The first Champagne house, Ruinart, was established in 1729. The main export market is the UK with 34 million bottles crossing the Channel annually.

Sustainability in Champagne

There is a big drive to reduce the ecological footprint in Champagne. The Comité Champagne is the driving force behind this endeavour and wants to see, among other projects, a 50% decrease in the use of pesticides over the next 15 years. This will improve the water quality in the area, as well as compensate somewhat for the threat of global warming. Interesting here is the development of a 'sexual confusion' application – a tiny container attached to the vineyard releases pheromones to discourage the mating of the butterflies. This results in no caterpillars in the vineyards.

There are currently 2,000 water treatment systems operating in Champagne to treat waste water (600,000m3) and reduce organic matter that finds its way back into the rivers, disturbing the balance. In 1990, 5% of water was treated, while today 100% clean water goes back into the system.

Social, environmental and economic factors converge to shape Champagne's sustainable future. Diagram courtesy of the Comité Champagne.



As far as biodiversity is concerned, there is strict maintenance of hedgerows, cover crops and planting vegetation that attracts the natural predators of the vine. All plots are obliged to be surrounded by cover crops and this is monitored regularly by satellite photography. Research projects in conjunction with universities include the introduction of suitable predators to the region.

Another objective is to reduce CO2 emissions by 75% by 2050. This includes oil for tractors, transport (currently 25%-30% of the total emissions, with human transport, both workers and visitors, accounting for the biggest portion) and packaging. The weight of packaging (boxes, labels, closures and bottles) currently makes up 30% of the CO2 emissions. The standard bottle weight has already dropped to 835g from 900g, and the packaging has changed to slimmer, trimmer and lighter options offering the same protection.

Some 10,000 tonnes of waste products are recycled annually, waste separation (crown caps and plastic inserts at disgorgement) programmes are underway and there is 100% recovery of by-products.

Champagne is well on its way to join the green movement that our world so desperately needs.

Salut!

Below: A blind tasting at the Comité Champagne premises sees members hard at work. Right: Anselme Selosse.



Ted Lelekas discovers Champagnes and metaphors on a fascinating visit to Domaine Jacques Selosse

According to the relevant write-up on the Berry, Bros. & Rudd website, Anselme Selosse is "variously described as eccentric, obsessed, charismatic and messianic, depending on one's point of view, [and] is one of the most fascinating vigneronns at work in Champagne today". For my part, all I can say is that, when I was informed that Domaine Jacques Selosse was included in the programme of our much-anticipated trip to Champagne, organised by the CWW and The Comité Champagne, I was thrilled!

I was told by various people not to expect to see much of the man himself, Anselme Selosse. They told me that he'll be busy in his vineyards, especially at this time of the year, and that he is generally "not the very communicative type". Well, after spending over two hours with him at his winery, I am happy to let them all know that they could not have been more mistaken.

Following a delicious lunch at the restaurant of Hotel Les Avisés, owned by the Selosse family, Anselme was waiting for us at the entrance of his winery, having a casual smoke. He had just come back from the vineyards and warned us





Clockwise from left: Pinot Noir grapes just harvested; the group listen to Anselme Selosse in his barrel cellar; the final packaging; the lees being stirred in tank. Photos of grapes and corks by Ted Lelekas. Others by Matt Wilson.



to us, even though he admitted that he believes in the importance of the influence of the moon on viticulture. He also explained that he is always the last grower to harvest (freshly-picked grapes kept coming in while we were there), not only because the moon dictates it but also because he wanted to “ensure that the grapes are ripe and sweet enough to eat and enjoy”.

He is famous for being a firm believer in terroir and it shows in his every word: “Terroir is key in tobacco, coffee, cocoa and, of



course, the vine. You need to be aware of it, respect it and make the most of it. I, for one, am not interested in producing the same wine time after time; I prefer to let the terroir and the vintage express themselves through each of my wines.”

He likes to speak in metaphors, as he goes on, showing us his soiled clothes and boots: “The harvest is like giving birth: it’s beautiful, but it’s also messy and bloody!” In addition, he insists that he is “not looking to make immortal wines but, on the contrary, to make wines that are very much alive”. For him, “Champagne is not an object of collection, but of consumption”.

His final, always metaphorical, words about himself: “In this universe around me, I am merely a butler: I am here to assist, not to create. In fact, you could say that I am like an obstetrician: if the wine is a baby, I do not give birth to it, I just help it come to the world!”

A fantastic tasting followed: Anselme selected special bottles from the entirety of his product range (Initial, Version Originale, Les Carelles) that were all uniquely elegant, savoury and yeasty, with perfect intensity and length. He insisted that all wines be tasted at 16°C and not chilled, and we soon realised how right he was. We subsequently said our goodbyes and left, so much richer after this amazing experience.

that he had an important appointment soon afterwards. Our group also had a tight schedule to follow. It seems that both parties enjoyed themselves way too much to be punctual in the end.

This visit was an eye-opener. It was definitely everything I expected and then some. What impressed me the most was not the tour around the premises of the small but busy and highly functional winery; not even the tasting of his Champagnes, led by their creator himself – a privilege that many a Champagne lover would kill for. It was the veritable pearls of wisdom that this great man took the time to share with us that were just priceless.

Champagne Selosse is a grower Champagne. This means that it is produced by grapes from the vineyards owned and cared for by the Selosse family. They currently own 35 plots scattered around selected vineyards of the Champagne region (Avize, Cramant, Oger, Le Mesnil-sur-Oger), producing mostly Chardonnay and a small quantity of Pinot Noir. Having studied at the Lycée Viticole de Beaune, Anselme insists on treating his Champagne like white Burgundy, which is why his wines are vinified separately in special new oak and acacia barrels brought in from Burgundy.

“I am not a biodynamist,” was the first thing he made clear

Michèle Shah survives the stairs to dig deep into the origins of AR Lenoble

Our visit to AR Lenoble in Damery was hosted by owners of the Champagne house, sister and brother Anne and Antoine Malassagne, and marketing manager Christian Holthausen. Antoine and Christian gave us a thoroughly interesting introduction to AR Lenoble, an independent family estate originating from 1915 when the family moved to Champagne from Alsace. Yet the name Lenoble does not originate from the family. This is because when Armand-Raphael Graser (Ann and Antoine's great-grandfather) started making Champagne in 1920, he did not want to use a German sounding name and so chose Lenoble as he believed the wines of Champagne to be the noblest wines from France; his initials AR preceded 'Lenoble'.

The village of Damery, some 6km from Epernay, is surrounded by vineyards and the estate is housed in a magnificent stately home dating back to 1772. Antoine explained that the estate owns a total of 18ha, which in Champagne makes for a small-medium sized house, with 10ha of grand cru Chardonnay in Chouilly, 6ha in the premier cru village of Bisseuil and 2ha in Damery in the Marne Valley. Their total production focuses on low yields (10 tonnes/ha) producing some 320,000 bottles per year, of which 50% is exported, and which are not released before three years of ageing in the cellars followed by three additional months of post-disgorgement ageing. Lenoble is one of only two Champagne houses to have been awarded the Haute Valeur Environnementale certification in recognition of its commitment to sustainability and biodiversity.

As with many of today's Champagne houses, Lenoble is sensitive to lower dosages to enhance the freshness of the Champagne. This relatively new trend for Champagne is also partly made possible by the greater awareness of viticulture, lowering yields to keep the grapes healthier and obtaining better maturity – the latter maybe also assisted by



Antoine Malassagne of AR Lenoble shows off the yeast deposit in the bottle pre-disgorgement, while members including Irvin Wolkoff take the photographs. This photo is by Michèle Shah.

Anne Malassagne, who in 1993 gave up her role as financial director at Oréal in Paris to join the company and run AR Lenoble with her brother Antoine, joined us for a very enjoyable and comprehensive tasting:

- » Intense: a blend of Pinot Noir Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay, 5g/l
- » Dosage Zéro: another blend of Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay, 0g/l
- » Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs: 100% Chardonnay, 5g/l

global warming. The average dosage at Lenoble is below 6g/l.

We were lucky to be visiting at the time of the harvest, although Antoine explained that it was still early days to be able to decide if this year would be good enough to produce a vintage. "We will have a better idea by December," he said.

Antoine tastes every batch in order to decide how to vinify, he prefers to declassify a wine rather than make a vintage that in his opinion does not have the desired character. "I know what kind of wine I want to produce so I adapt my cuvée to the wine I want to produce," said Antoine, who has been in charge of the winemaking since 1996.

Our descent down to the cellars some 20 metres below ground was quite a challenge – this was even before we had done really serious tasting! We were warned to take special care and to hold on to the bannisters, so most of us did as we were told. Suddenly from above there was some commotion as our photographer, Matt, had tripped on his tripod and was in danger of setting off a domino effect. Luckily, no one was hurt and nothing damaged!

- » Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs 2008: 100% Chardonnay, 4g/l
- » Rosé Terroirs: Chouilly – Bisseuil, 88% Chardonnay, 12% Pinot Noir, 3g/l
- » Premier Cru Blanc de Noirs 2009: Bisseuil, 100% Pinot Noir, 4g/l
- » Cuvée Gentilhomme 2009 Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs: 100% Chardonnay, 3g/l
- » Cuvée Les Aventures Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs: 100% Chardonnay, 3g/l
- » Cuvée Riche Demi-Sec: blend of Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay, 34g/l

Following this excellent tasting which really opened our eyes and palates to the potential quality of AR Lenoble, we were then invited to a magnificent dinner.

The evening came to a close with Antoine's first vintage, a special bottling of vintage 1996, one of Champagne's top vintages, to which Antoine in great modesty commented: "I was just lucky to kick off to my winemaking career on such a great vintage."



Above: The group make the most of a breather outside Jacquesson before the busy day begins. Right from top: Ted Lelekas picks Pinot Noir; it gets loaded into the press; and... tasted by Ann Samuelsen and the group.



DAY 2

Robert Smyth gets his harvest fix at Jacquesson

It was straight off to the vineyards for some much welcome harvest action as Jacquesson was one of a small number of growers with grapes still out on the vine. The team had taken a risk in leaving some Pinot Noir, but the weather obliged as the Pinot managed to get that extra ripeness in the Indian summer of this otherwise troublesome vintage. After all, the maturity of the grapes at harvest is one of the pillars of this renowned house's approach to making Champagne.

It has been 28 years since Jean-Hervé Chiquet and his brother Laurent received the green light from their father to take Dizy-based Jacquesson in a more quality-oriented direction, which centres around the concept of yielding less but riper fruit. "I have exactly the same ideas as Laurent," said Jean-Hervé. No warring siblings to be found here it would appear. The brothers sold five hectares as they restructured and now own 28 hectares and buy in from an additional seven. Jacquesson owns vineyards in two main areas: the Grande Vallée de la Marne and in the Côte des Blancs. In the Grande Vallée de la Marne, it has vines in Aÿ grand cru, and Dizy and Hautvillers which are both premiers crus. The vineyards are mostly sloping, facing east, south or south-west where the chalk lies at varying depths below the

soil, Jean-Hervé explained. "We also have holdings in two grand crus in the Côte des Blancs, Avize and Oiry; there our parcels face due south, with chalk showing on the surface."

Jacquesson's production of around 260,000 bottles today is some 40% lower than in 1988. "We always believed the yields were too high, we tried green harvest but then sought to make life more difficult for the vines. We wanted the roots to go deeper and turned to cover crops or ploughing," said Jean-Hervé. "It's not a matter of just letting the grass grow – we select and sow it, so it's not a completely natural process," he said, adding they have settled on a combination of two-thirds ploughing and one-third cover crops. Another vineyard management technique is to have less foliage in order to promote more aeration, which Jean-Hervé describes at the best anti-botrytis weapon. "Here you need to dry the fruit after rain, while in the Rhône you need to protect it against the sun."

Jacquesson cultivates grapes and makes the wine in an "almost organic" manner, according to Jean-Hervé who says they remain wary of "replacing a few chemicals with heavy metals, such as copper sulphate". Nevertheless, one-third of the domaine is organically certified. In the vineyard, we saw sexual confusion in action with the devices attached to the vines. "It sure is frustrating for the butterflies," he quipped.

We later met Laurent as the grapes were going into the vertical Coquard presses. "We favour vertical pressing due to there being less movement of fruit, we don't want to spoil the fruit and the stems are never ripe," explained Jean-Hervé. Some dried ice is used to avoid oxidation, which creates a layer of CO₂ to separate the grapes from the atmosphere.

In the cellar, the first fermentation is carried out in used oak casks, allowing the wine to breathe and because old casks do not transmit the aromas that come from new wood. Jean-Hervé and Laurent disagree with the notion that wine will age better if malolactic fermentation is inhibited. "We favour malolactic fermentation most of the time, it depends on the wine. This is my 39th vintage and I'm still waiting for a non-acid vintage," he said. Jacquesson neither fines nor filters, instead allowing clarification to happen naturally.

The great attention to detail comes across in Jacquesson's Champagnes that strike an impressive balance between freshness and complexity. Each bottling of Jacquesson's main Champagne has a number that changes every year with the vintage mentioned on the back label. Cuvée 738, for example, is predominantly based on the 2010 vintage, while Cuvée 739 is mainly from 2011. A certain amount of each cuvée is kept on the lees and held back from the market and re-released years later as *Dégorgement Tardive*. We also tasted very complex single vineyard offerings from Dizy and Avize from the 2005 and 2007 vintages.

Irvin Wolkoff peruses Pinot Meunier fit for the Spécial Club at Champagne Moussé Fils

Pinot Meunier hasn't had much respect in the wine world. For winemakers in Champagne, it's the secret lover they embrace with pleasure but don't want their friends to find out about. The historical poor reputation of the grape (called Meunier in the region) is the result of poor understanding of how and where to grow it and how to handle the fruit in the winery. Today, producers understand the need for clearer juice, long fermentation, strict temperature control during fermentation (15°C) and malolactic fermentation. These (and other) technical advances have promoted the use of Meunier to add richness, elegance, and tell-tale toasted bread notes and a hint of red berry fruit to Champagnes.

Champagne Moussé Fils produces wines predominately based on Pinot Meunier. Their house motto is 'profondement Meunier'. The variety thrives on the fertile soils in the vineyards Moussé owns or controls at the western end of the Montagne de Reims (black clay over green clay over mixed clay and sand over Champenois chalk). The vignoble covers five family-owned hectares in Cuisles and two rented hectares in other villages on the same hillside. These sites are largely unsuitable for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

Champagne Moussé Fils was founded in 1923 by Eugène Moussé. His great-grandson Cédric is the current winemaker at the house. Cédric is a convivial and energetic fellow who delighted us generally and specifically by disgorging a bottle *à la volée*. His innovative inclination

shows in heavy investment in sustainable practices at the winery, ranging from recycling well water to relying on solar and other renewable energy sources. He also engages in ongoing experimentation to identify best practices in the vineyard and the *chai*.

The Moussé range of Champagnes includes:

- » Cuvée Extra Or d'Eugène: Blanc de Noirs, Extra Brut, solera 2003–2011, 80% Meunier, 20% Pinot Noir, low dosage
- » Or d'Eugène: Blanc de Noirs, solera 2003-2013, 80% Meunier, 20% Pinot Noir
- » Terre d'Illite 2011: Blanc de Noirs, 95% Meunier, 5% Pinot Noir
- » Spécial Club 2012: Blanc de Noirs, 100% Meunier
- » Spécial Club 2012 Rosé de Saignée: 100% Meunier
- » Anecdote: Blanc de Blancs, 100% Chardonnay, *lieu dit 'Les Varosses'*

None was less than very good, and the rest were excellent to outstanding. The house produces fewer than 60,000 bottles a year. Two-thirds is exported to markets in Europe, Canada, the US, South Africa and Asia.



Cédric Moussé in his modern winification cellar.



The grand and welcoming entrance to Champagne Ruinart in Reims.

Ann Samuelsen revels in a Blanc de Blancs bonanza and epic evening dining at the oldest Champagne house of them all, which was established in 1729 by Nicolas Ruinart

Our group arrived a little late and we went straight to a tasting with Ruinart's winemaker Frédéric Panaiotis. Ruinart's goal is to make clean, fresh, precise and easy to drink Champagnes in a gently reductive style. The house used mostly red grapes with only 15% of Chardonnay grapes in their blend before 1946, but subsequently opted for the aromatic freshness of a Chardonnay-driven approach. Accordingly, Ruinart is now world-renowned for its Blanc de Blancs. Frédéric told us that to achieve aromatic freshness requires working in a reductive style, which needs two key elements: using only stainless steel tanks with no oak, including the monitoring of the oxygen throughout the winemaking process; and the use of young reserve wines (less than two years old).

The tasting at Ruinart was a highlight with their fantastic line-up of Blanc de Blancs Champagnes. The first NV included base wine from 2013 and the reserve wines from 2011/12. The wine was fresh and delicate with aromas of citrus, white flower and cream. The second NV was in magnum and was more toasty and bready with more body.

This NV had a base wine from 2012 and reserve wines from 2010/11.

We then moved on to the Dom Ruinart Blanc de Blancs vertical tasting. For the Dom Ruinart vintage Champagnes only grand cru Chardonnay is used, which comes from different Côte des Blancs villages (Avize, Cramant, Chouilly, Le Mesnil-sur-Oger) and Montagne de Reims (Sillery, Puisieulx, Verzy, Verzenay and Mailly). Ruinart normally uses 60%-70% Chardonnay from Côte des Blancs and the rest from Montagne de Reims. However, in the cool 1996 vintage, it was the other way around.

First up was the 2004 vintage, which has Chablis-like character and was kept for eight years on lees and has a fine balanced dosage of 5.5g/l. The next was from 2002, a vintage that gave a Champagne with characteristics similar to a Chassagne Montrachet – richer and more textured with a toasty, brioche and buttery palate. Ruinart did not make vintage Champagne in the challenging years of 2003 and 2005. The next to hit the market will be a 2006, which is a charming vintage that will develop quicker than other vintages, according to Frédéric.

Then it was on to the 1998 vintage, which was a challenging and warmer year than usual. This Champagne was nutty and honeyed, but fresh on the palate with great mouthfeel. It was almost as if it had ‘made its own oak’. This Champagne tasted younger than the 1998 vintage. It has a fine minerally, toasty, biscuity bouquet with a linear, refreshing finish. It was difficult to detect the 10g/l dosage due to the naturally crisp acidity of the 1996 vintage.

The last vintage in the vertical line-up was from 1993 – golden in colour, with a honey, butterscotch bouquet and an oxidative hint of bruised apple. The first bottle was clearly not up to the winemakers’ standard as he insisted on opening a second bottle in magnum, which was perfect.

After the tasting, we were guided down to their famous cellar, which is a full 8km long and 40 metres deep and divided into three levels. There are more than 100km of these deep chalky *crayères*, in Reims.

Champagne is an excellent food wine and should be paired with meals as often as possible. Ruinart has done a great job communicating this message and works together with top sommeliers around the world. It also holds

a competition in which sommeliers compete in blind tastings and provide food recommendations for each Champagne they taste. Each nation’s winner receives a week-long trip to visit Ruinart.

At dinner we were joined by Olivier Livoir, Ruinart’s event manager. The amuse-bouche of fresh tuna served on a small toast with crème fraiche and herbs was served with the 1993 vintage in magnum – very complex with layers of flavours and fresh acidity.

Champagne Ruinart’s fabulous Roman crayères cellars.

The starter of semi-cooked foie gras with pear and chutney was served with a jeroboam of Ruinart ‘R’. A blend of 40% Chardonnay, 57% Pinot Noir and 3% Meunier, it was a nice match with its pear, apple aromas with spicy notes and a round breadly aftertaste.

The next dish, roasted back bass fish, white beet with candied citrus fruit and an emulsion of fresh cheese, proved a sophisticated match with a magnum of Dom Ruinart Blanc de Blancs 2004, which had a delicate structure and was fresher than the 75cl bottle we had tasted earlier.

The main dish, smoked guinea fowl supreme, braised marrow, creamy hazelnut and a sangria reduction, was brilliantly paired with a magnum of Dom Ruinart Rosé 1990. The rosé was quite developed on the nose with an earthy spiciness and nutty, dried apricot on the aftertaste.

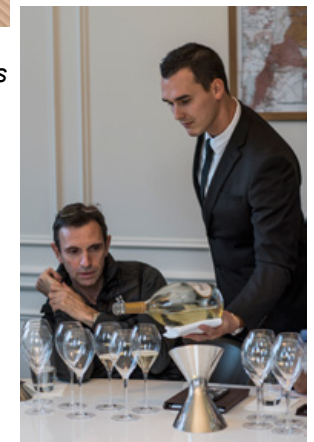
The dessert, matcha tea shortbread and red fruits, was served together with a fresh and fruity Ruinart Rosé.



The dessert. Photo by Arto Koskelo.



Right: Frédéric Panaiotis checks on the pouring, an art that, below fascinates others too...



DAY 3

Julia Kostadinova welcomes an early start to catch the inimitable Eric Rodez or was it the Elton John of Champagne?

Our last day in Champagne started really early, but the prospect of starting it with Champagne instead of breakfast was totally acceptable to the entire group. And what Champagne it was...

Eric Rodez welcomed us in a small cellar, literally full of barrels, and his first words were: "When I was young, I knew I would become a Champagne vigneron. Not necessarily winemaker, but for sure – a winegrower. I am proud to be a real farmer from Champagne." There are few words to be added after this intro, but still it was interesting to find out how he managed to become not only a good winemaker, but one of the best biodynamic winemakers in the world! The name of Eric Rodez nowadays is synonymous with top quality, biodynamic, super-maniac Champagne.

His story is exciting: as a child he imagined he would

become a perfumer, but after an accident at home (involving rose essence and a very angry father), he had forgotten about this vocation. A few years later he went to Burgundy where he discovered wine, according to his words – not the bubbles, but the wine. "The magic in Champagne is that we are making the bubbles, which can cheer you up or bring you down... Well, [they're] more likely cheer you up. My idea is to make good wine with bubbles," he explained. And that's how he found himself studying oenology in Reims. The day he graduated, he started at Krug and again by chance only a month later became the chief oenologist. "I was only 25 and I was so proud, I thought I knew everything. When I left Krug, my ego was enormous and as fortune turned out, my first own vintage – 1984, turn out to be exceptionally...bad. I had all the recipes, but I suddenly realised that the reality is quite different..." Eric does not like the word 'quality', for him this is a consumer notion, not a producer's – his concept is to take the best from his land and to give pleasure. I know, it sounds like a cliché, but if you have the chance to meet Eric (or Elton!) you will find out that cliché is the last word you will have in mind around him.

"We live in a world of standardisation," opined Eric Rodez. "And this includes Champagne; although it is a complex region. But as you know every concert is an interpretation, every concert is a rare moment in one's life. The more consumers of wine we have in the world, the more special and terroir-driven wines they want. And these are the people that liberate us from the box," he asserted.

Apart from the physical resemblance to the famous singer and composer, Sir Elton John, the parallel is complete also because Eric constantly makes comparisons between wine and music. He keeps calling all his wines melodies: "in this cuvée I put two melodies" is one way to explain his classy Cuvée des Crayères, and "to have real music in your glass you need real music in the vineyards and thus I choose biodynamic methods for my agriculture. I realise we are all connected and it's impossible to be organic if your neighbours aren't, but this is the right and the only way". Taste any of his complex and yet classical Champagne wines and you will discover a universal depth.



The music-inspired Eric Rodez of the eponymous Champagne company.

Yair Koren finds big may be beautiful in the art deco surroundings at Champagne Collet, the region's oldest cooperative

Our CWW trip to Champagne concluded with an exciting visit to La Cité du Champagne Collet-Cogevi in the village of Ay. It is an historical and cultural complex which includes La Maison Cogevi, La Villa Collet which is dedicated to art deco, and La Vinothèque with a collection of 30,000 bottles in Ay's centuries old wine cellars.

COGEVI (Coopérative Générale des Vignerons de la Champagne) is the oldest cooperative in the region, established in 1921, a decade after *la révolte champenoise* or Champagne riots. At that time local winemakers struggled against fraudulent production, claiming the enforcement of the law which fixed regulations for Champagne production. The history of the cooperative is illustrated at La Maison Cogevi with 1,500 authentic documents. We also visited the outstanding Museum of Champagne Trades overlooking Ay's inspiring vineyards, declared a World Heritage site last year by UNESCO.

Cogevi continues to expand and today the production stands at seven million bottles a year, including 500,000 of the premium brand Collet (other brands are Jacquart and Montaudon). The cooperative has 800 members with 820ha

The CWW group tastes in Cogevi's vinothèque.



of vineyards. In 2004 Cogeви launched a huge production facility in Oger and today it has a storage capacity of 27 million bottles.

With our hosts we tasted five Collet wines mainly based on premiers and grands crus. Cellar Master Sébastien Walasiak says that he makes gastronomy wines – each cuvée of Champagne Collet is intended to be associated with an appropriate occasion, from an aperitif to the most complex dish:

- » Extra Brut: 50% Chardonnay, 40% Pinot Noir, 10% Meunier. Well balanced, fresh, mineral, easy drinking
- » Brut Art Deco: Same blend as above, from the same villages, but higher dosage. Powerful, floral, smooth, fruit flavours, unique finesse, long finish
- » Brut Vintage 2006: 66% Chardonnay, 34% Pinot Noir. Still young, citrus and brioche notes, creamy texture, very long finish
- » Millésimé 2006: 60% Chardonnay, 40% Pinot Noir, 40% in oak, complex, tropical fruit notes, mineral, balanced, excellent wine
- » Rosé Dry: Dosage 26g/l, includes 16% Pinot Noir vinified as red, notes of citrus and red fruits, balanced sweetness, fresh and elegant.



Arto Koskelo muses about Champagne with food and finds some killer combos

These days we take matching Champagne with a rich variety of dishes for granted, but things have not always been this simple. The culture of matching noble sparkling wine with food has evolved gradually.

Taking this into consideration, it is perhaps not that surprising that the old Champenois guard used to regard rosé as a wine style best consumed by ladies and not as the perfect match for the marvellous poultry dishes the northern French cook. This is obviously prehistory, since during our visit Champagne was poured at dinner in all colours and matched with food with great skill.

Since the pairing of food and wine is approached with a nonchalant attitude in Champagne, just like in most of France, a visitor can utilise the situation by conducting personal experiments. This was my plan when I decided to find out how far you can go with rosé.

Indeed, the Dom Ruinart rosé 1990 in magnum we were served at Ruinart was beautiful with smoked guinea fowl, see photograph above [by Arto]. Not a big surprise and kudos to the chef. Another example: the Collet rosé with hefty dosage was a home run with creamy nougat pastries at Cogeви, where we enjoyed a great lunch.

The boundaries were finally violated when I personally



took charge of matching the cuisine with wine and tried to combine Cattier rosé with a medium-rare beef dish. An utter failure, which gave me deep gratification. I'd finally found the limits of the extremely versatile rosé Champagne.

Some of the wine and food pairings we got to enjoy during the Champagne trip were truly memorable. The toasty yet vibrant Les Aventures from AR Lenoble was a slam dunk with turbot, as one could expect. And, their Chouilly Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs 1996 did nothing short of wonders with Mimolette and Comté cheese.

A step towards more citrus notes was the sea bream tartar with lime, apple, and kiwi which found its match with Jacquesson Dizy 2007. The first course made it apparent that the participating members of the CWW were about to enjoy a terrific lunch with Jean-Hervé Chiquet of Jacquesson.

My personal favourite dish was a particularly French one, a semi-cooked foie gras, pear, and chutney [photo above by Arto]. Not only a truly pretty dish to look at, it was also a great match with Ruinart R. The pronounced acidity of the delicate wine cut through the fat of the foie gras and seemed to create many sighs around the table.

All in all, the trip provided the participants not only with Champagnes to reminisce for times to come, but culinary delights that surpassed even the expectations one can have when signing on for a wine trip in France.

Left: note-taking at Collet;
below: Collet's Icon 1921





*Left: A selection of Champagnes tasted at the Comité Champagne.
Right: St-Georges church, outside Champagne AR Lenoble in Damery.
Below: Harvesting Pinot Noir at Champagne Jacquesson.*



Thanks and acknowledgements

The participants sincerely thank everyone at The Comité Champagne for inviting us on a fabulous and extremely informative trip which saw us gain much new insight into this outstanding region. The participants would also like to thank Caroline Henry and Andrea Warren from the Circle for all their hard work in organising this trip of a lifetime. Caroline, who resides in the region, also acted as our indefatigable and extremely knowledgeable guide, and helped us to explore the diversity, depth and breadth of the Champagne region.

We were spoiled rotten from start to finish by the winemakers who went out of their way to give us the most from our time in Champagne as we traversed the region in style on one of the most comfortable buses imaginable!



Above: At the tasting of Champagne Collet at Cogevi, Robert Smyth who compiled this report, in conversation with Irvin Wolkoff.

Back cover: Four cellar hands at Champagne Jacquesson.

*Photos by **Matt Wilson**.*



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