



Reviews by **David Schildknecht**
December 2013

Henriet-Bazin, Villers-Marmery (Montagne de Reims)

NV Brut Blanc de Blancs L36 (\$60.00) (Sparkling White) Rating: 89

NV Blanc de Noirs Disg. 2/2013 (\$70.00) (Sparkling White) Rating: 88

Marie Noëlle Henriet-Rainon's village, Villers-Marmery (just south of Verzenay and Verzy), is known as the sole Montagne de Reims outpost to be dominated by Chardonnay, although only one of the wines I sampled from her this year was. The Henriet-Bazin **NV Brut Blanc de Blanc L36** smells of apple cider and lightly roasted peanut. Creamy and expansive on the palate, it mingles baked apple with almond cream, peanut butter, and piquant peach kernel that, along with alkaline and stony notes as well as suggestions of legume sprouts, serve for considerable counterpoint. There is a slight sense of opacity to the finishing flavors and the mousse here is a bit coarse; but this flavorful, distinctive cuvée is well worth employing at table over the coming year. The Henriet-Bazin **NV Blanc de Noirs Disg. 2/2013** is 100% Pinot and based on vintage 2009. Aromas of smoky black tea, toasted hickory nut, and lime rind anticipate the piquancy delivered on a palpably dense and brightly citric palate. Fresh lime and sappy apple with prominent pip bitterness and skin chewiness make for an invigorating if phenolically slightly coarse finish. Like the Blanc de Blancs from this producer that I tasted alongside, here is highly flavorful and distinctive Champagne for enjoying over the coming year

Michel Lorient, Festigny (Vallee de la Marne)

2006 Brut Pinot Meunier Vieille Vignes (\$50.00) (Sparkling White) Rating: 92

In a side valley of the Marne's Left Bank, Festigny has a reputation for its Meunier and is reputed to be Krug's preferred source for that cépage, whose singular virtues they thoroughly appreciated even in an era when Meunier was treated by most producers as decidedly second-class. And from the reputed top grower in this commune, I tasted this year (unfortunately) just one of eight cuvées. According to the intriguing account he's written, Lorient – like Corsica's Jean-Charles Abbatucci and a couple of other imaginative growers I recall – plays music to his vines and young wines. Whatever he thinks it takes to achieve results like this, I'm on board! Most of Michel Lorient's 17 acres are planted with Meunier, and when I tasted his single vineyard **2006 Brut Pinot Meunier Vieille Vignes**, I knew that the tales of both Festigny's and his Meunier's prowess were no exaggeration! White peach, pear, and apple display infectious juiciness and utmost clarity, allowing a virtual field full of flowers – as well as subtle inflections of mineral ilk – to shine through. The texture of this Champagne is astonishingly creamy and caressing, Meunier clearly displaying a capacity for the sort of natural-born creaminess one also can also experience with Pinot Blanc, reinforced here by ultra-fine mousse. A bittersweet hint of kumquat adds invigoration to a nuanced, plush carpet-runner of a finish. Experience this outstanding value in utterly distinctive Champagne soon; though I would not be surprised to witness it holding up nicely, and perhaps evolving interestingly, over a 2-3 year period.

Jean Velut, Montgueux

NV Brut Tradition L1041 (\$45.00) (Sparkling White) Rating: 91

NV Brut Blanc de Blancs de Montgueux L0940 (\$50.00) (Sparkling White) Rating: 92

Jean Velut is only the second grower whose wines I've tasted from Montgueux – a tiny, Chardonnay-dominated bastion just outside the city of Troyes, roughly halfway between the Sézanne and the Côte des Bars – even though I championed this terroir more than a decade ago as an importer, with the ascendance of Emmanuel Lassoigne (under my account of whose wines in this report, you can read further details about Montgueux). It delights me to announce after this first encounter that Lassoigne now has serious competition from at least one neighbor, meaning that, like his, Velut's wines will stretch your imagination concerning what can come of that ubiquitous grape Chardonnay as well from Champagne. Velut bottles several cuvées – as well as a red wine – that I did not experience on this occasion and shall look forward to tasting as part of a visit next year. Velut's **NV Brut Tradition L1041** – incorporating 20% Pinot – delivers a fascinating evocation of ripe, juicy green zebra tomatoes tinged with fresh lime and cilantro – a metaphorically cooling and laid-back vinous impression if ever there was one, not to mention a consummately refreshing one. The palate feels positively creamy, yet the wine's citric brightness is almost electrifying. The finish reveals equally fascinating, unusual, and delicious characteristics: crunchy, nutty water chestnut, raw almond, piquant lime peel, and the bite and musky aftertaste of rose radish. I was tempted to dock this wine a point to reflect how disconcertingly unfamiliar it's liable to seem to many tasters; but hopefully my description has helped warn or encourage readers according to their proclivities! Based on analogy with the wines of Velut's neighbor Lassoigne, I would not be surprised if this excellent value in Champagne (I noted some terrific discount prices from on-line merchants) proved delightful – and changed in equally fascinating and delicious ways – over the next 3-4 years. The Velut **NV Brut Blanc de Blanc de Montgueux L0940** delivers a striking nose and refreshing palate impression of lime and lemon laced with ginseng, white pepper, and salt. It delivers a creamy texture and mouth-coating richness without losing brightly citric snap and refreshment, and allied to a chalkiness that calls to mind a dense, cool block. The palate-staining finish offers not just saliva-inducement but genuine complexity in its expression of *fleur de sel*, while chalk, citrus, and herbs cavort in near-kaleidoscopic array. This beauty represents outstanding value for its appellation and will, I suspect, remain deliciously fascinating for another 4-5 years. Importers: Bonhomie Wine Imports, South Orange, NJ; Tel. (973) 821-5110; and David Bowler Wines, New York, NY; tel. (212) 807-1680

Pierre Brigandat, Channes (Côtes des Bar)

NV Brut Tradition Disg. 10/2012 (\$45.00) (Sparkling White) Rating: 90

2007 Extra Brut Dentelles et Crinolines (\$70.00) (Sparkling White) Rating: 90

A first-generation wine grower, Bertrand Brigandat is – I can't resist the temptation to write “yet another” – biodynamic idealist of the Côtes des Bar, here more specifically, its Kimmeridgian belt that (ironically, if one thinks of Chablis) is planted overwhelmingly with Pinot Noir. Most of the fruit from his 20 acres is sold to négociants. And while his 2005 Brut I tasted betrayed some of the fungal and potato-like aspects that are dragging down many of the Champagnes from that vintage, the other two wines I sampled on this first acquaintance were spot-on. A fascinating nose of toasted peanut, plum and cherry from Brigandat's **NV Brut Tradition Disg. 10/2012** anticipates the characteristics that, on a firm palate, attract an urchin roe-like savor which is parlayed into a mouthwateringly long finish rendered invigorating by the chewiness of fruit skin and piquancy of pits. I predict that this pure Pinot (though not labeled “Blanc de Noirs”) is going to be incredibly versatile at table over at least the next couple of years. The Brigandat **2007 Extra Brut Dentelles et Crinolines** mingles 30% Chardonnay with old-vines Pinot, and advertises its cuvée nickname, incidentally, solely in very fine script on a neck label. Given its borderline austerity by way of a spare texture and mere 3.4 grams residual sugar, I would not want to have drunk this cuvée disgorged in October of 2012 much sooner. But it makes an impressive and distinctive statement today. Maritime alkalinity, salinity and hints of algae are mingled in the nose with allusions to the lemon zest, crabapple, and alfalfa sprouts that lend this bottling a protractedly tangy and bracing finish. It held up very well for three days, and I suspect that it will also show well for another couple of years.

Marie-Noelle Ledru, Ambonnay (Montagne de Reims)

NV Extra Brut LE6 (\$65.00) (Sparkling White) Rating: 89

NV Brut LB5 (\$65.00) (Sparkling White) Rating: 91

NV Brut Rose LR13 (\$70.00) (Sparkling Rose) Rating: 90

2008 Brut Blanc de Noirs Cuvée du Goulte (\$85.00) (Sparkling White) Rating: 92

Marie-Noëlle Ledru's Ambonnay estate has acquired an illustrious reputation among self-styled Champagne cognoscenti thanks not only to the quality of her wines, but also to the fact that she handles virtually every task personally (even including hand-disgorgement). That her already diminutive acreage was recently reduced by more than half – to a mere five acres – on account of a family land dispute will no doubt render her status even more cult-like. Fortunately, if you can manage to locate some bottles of these intriguing, boldly flavored and stylistically robust expressions of Ambonnay terroir, their prices are by no means inflated. Ledru's **NV Extra Brut LE6** is a 2009-based, bone dry cuvée incorporating 15% Chardonnay, with Pinot from Ambonnay and (in small measure) from Bouzy. Fruit kernel and sprout-like piquancy against a background of tart apple and toasted nuts make for a stimulating but rather austere impression, given this cuvée's utter dryness. This is tempered by the wine's silken texture, and there is a slight but satisfying tug on the salivary glands in the finish. I would be inclined to drink this over the coming year. Marie-Noëlle Ledru's **NV Brut LB5** is dominated by vintage 2010; like her Extra Brut bottlings is sourced from Ambonnay with a small share of Bouzy; and incorporates around 15% Chardonnay. A fascinating nose of shitake, toasted grains, lemon, pineapple, and grapefruit sets the themes for a brightly juicy, palate impression rich in saline savor and otherwise umami-rich stimulants to the salivary glands. Citrus oils and nut oils, zest of lemon, and cyanic peach kernel and apple pit combine for considerable bitterness in a finish that is impressively gripping if not particularly precise. This distinctive libation should be worth pursuing for at least a couple of years and prove useful at table in places where Champagne might usually fear to tread. The conspicuously dry Ledru **NV Brut Rosé LR13** is nearly identical in make-up to her LB5 Brut, save for the addition of still Ambonnay Pinot. Tart red raspberry, rhubarb and fraise du bois are shadowed by a faint aura of their distilled counterparts as well as by a light shroud of yeast. The palate impression is firm and the mousse fine-grained. Red berry juiciness is so vivid as to incorporate an evocation of berry seed-crunching that, allied with nutty piquancy, makes for a highly invigorating finish of bursting intensity. I can imagine this being more luscious if it had a bit more residual sugar; and I can also imagine it taking on additional complexity over the next couple of years. Marie-Noëlle Ledru's **2008 Brut Blanc de Noirs Cuvée du Goulte** reflects – as this cuvée does every year – whatever Pinot fruit she thinks has achieved the best flavors. Crabapple, grapefruit and lemon combine for a vibrant, sappy performance, suffused with toasted wheat, sesame, yeast, and savory crab shell reduction, with piquancy of peach kernel adding to the stimulation of a mouthwatering finish. The next day, an interesting impression of high-acid but ripe tomato had emerged, strengthening the tang and grip in this decidedly dry, robust and kinetic – if by no means the most refined or flattering – expression of Ambonnay. I suspect it will be worth following for 2-3 years. Importer: Bonhomie Wine Imports, South Orange, NJ; tel. (973) 821-5110