

Wine Spectator

WineSpectator.com

HAMPAGNE



MARTINELLI

ROBERT DE NIRO'S
TRIBECA GRILL

AMARONI

DEC. 15, 2016

\$6.99 US

50



281 01712 7

Global demand for sparkling wine is on the rise, accompanied by a growing diversity of styles from countries around the world. Yet the Champagne region of France endures as the world's leading source of bubbly, retaining its pride of place with benchmark versions and across-the-board quality. Wine lovers continue to seek out Champagne's distinctive renditions for celebration as well as casual enjoyment, with exports to the United States growing last year by more than 7 percent.

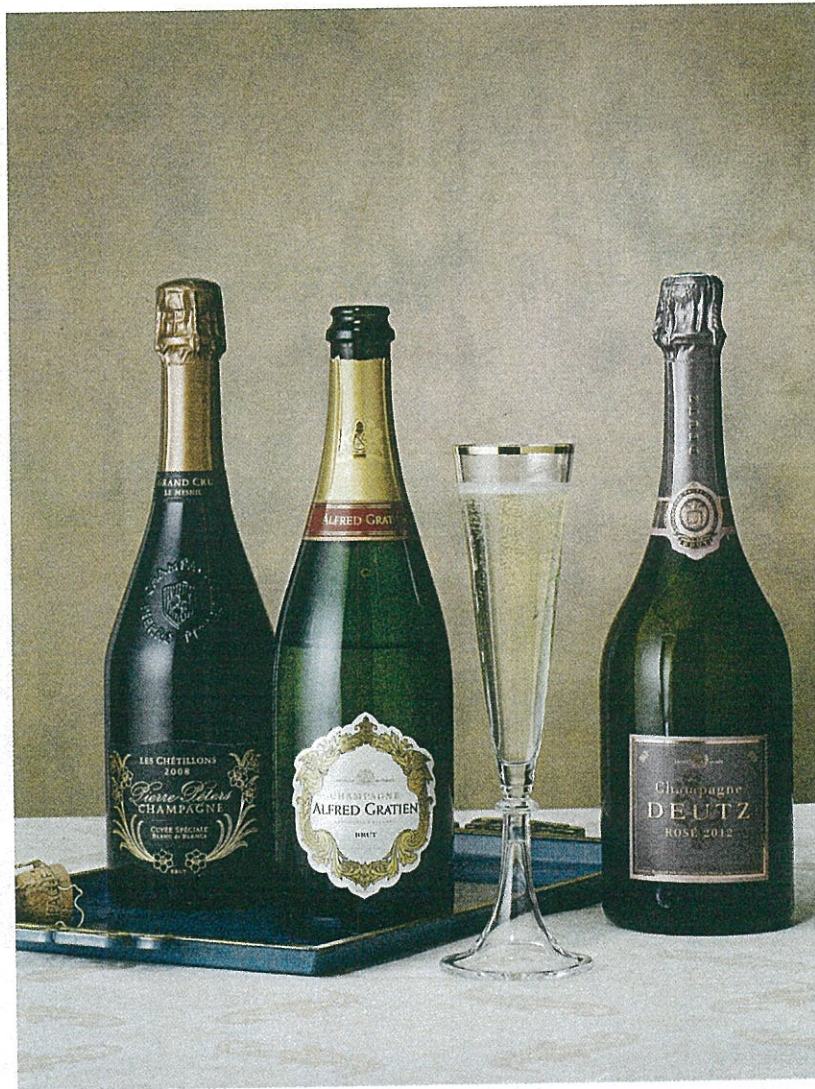
This growth means that Champagne drinkers have more to choose from than ever before. Since my previous report ("Champagne Abundance," Dec. 15, 2015), I have reviewed 360 Champagnes, with bottlings from more than 100 different producers. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available at www.winespectator.com/121516.)

Well-represented in this report are familiar names that represent the core of the U.S. market, such as Veuve Clicquot, Moët & Chandon and Taittinger. These are among the large producers known as *négociants* or houses, which own vineyards yet also source grapes from multiple sites among the rolling hills around Champagne's dual city centers of Reims and Épernay. Shipments from these large producers arrived stateside in even greater quantities in 2015 than in 2014, which was itself a strong year for Champagne.

My tastings also encompass the other end of the spectrum: Champagnes from *récoltant-manipulants*, or grower-producers. While the big houses rely on both estate and purchased fruit, grower-producers use only their own grapes. Although these small growers still represent only a sliver of the Champagne market (just more than 1 million cases in the U.S. versus the *négociants'* 18 million cases), they are clearly on a roll. In terms of growth, grower-producers outpaced both the *négociants* and the region as a whole, with shipments to the U.S. climbing more than 12 percent in 2015. This success represents an increase in bottlings from growers new to the U.S., combined with greater availability from more-established growers.

Recent years have seen Champagne producers in both camps expand by offering new labels that explore niches in the market. One emerging category showing increased availability and higher quality is blanc de noirs. Champagne is a blend of up to three grapes; most versions blend Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, often adding smaller amounts of Pinot Meunier. But producers can elect to bottle only a single grape instead. Bottlings that are made in this style—blanc de blancs (Chardonnay only) or blanc de noirs (Pinot Noir and/or Pinot Meunier only)—tend to highlight fruit of particularly good quality from a given area or vintage and are typically offered at slightly higher price points.

There is no distinction between blanc de blancs and blanc de noirs in terms of color (both present as white sparkling wine), yet the difference in grape type is a significant factor in the flavor range and structure of the resulting Champagne. The number of blancs de noirs I tasted this year is more than triple what *Wine Spectator* reviewed a decade ago (from six to 20), with nearly all the bottlings in this report receiving outstanding ratings of 90 to 94 points. This is a category to watch, particularly when looking for Champagne to pair with food. The Philipponnat Brut Blanc de Noirs



Recent releases from Champagne display the range of styles producers are exploring in this dynamic region, including vintage-dated bottlings, rosés and blancs de blancs.

2009 (93 points, \$70) is a broad-shouldered and structured version that could be matched to light meat or even game, and the Dosnon Brut Champagne Noire NV (92, \$55) offers a pure beam of black cherry fruit that's exactly what you might expect from a wine made from 100 percent Pinot Noir.

Rosé Champagne is by no means an emerging category at this point, but as its sales keep climbing, producers continue to jump on the bandwagon. Piper-Heidsieck released the 2007 Brut Rosé Rare this year, its first rosé bottling in the tête du cuvée Rare line. (The house has produced a white version of Rare since the 1970s.) At 92 points, it's one of the top-scoring Champagnes of my tastings, a deftly woven wine with a rich and toasty overtone and a vibrant finish. At \$450 per bottle, it's also one of the most expensive rosés. But the category includes many wallet-friendly versions as well. The elegant Chartogne-Taillet Brut Rosé NV (92, \$55) and the fresh and creamy Alfred Gratien Brut Rosé NV (92, \$65) are two fine examples.

Beyond these successful subcategories, the biggest dividing line in Champagne is between non-vintage and vintage-dated bottlings. Historically, Champagne producers blended wine from multiple harvests in order to offer consistent quality from year to year, offsetting the poorer vintages that were common in a northerly wine region prior to climate change. For most non-vintage Champagne, the bulk of the blend tends to come from the most recent two or three vintages, with the remainder from older reserve wines, which help to provide balance and consistency.



Alexandre Chartogne explores exciting single-vineyard bottlings at his family estate, Chartogne-Taillet, while offering good value with the outstanding Brut Rosé NV.

In general, non-vintage Champagne is a good bet in terms of overall quality, which is why the category accounts for the vast majority of Champagne sales in the U.S. In weaker years, producers will decide against making a vintage-dated version, funneling the top-quality fruit they might otherwise use for the vintage bottling into the non-vintage cuvée. Additionally, most Champagne producers work hard on their non-vintage wine, viewing it as their selling card and the first impression they'll never get a second chance to make.

The bulk of non-vintage wines I reviewed show outstanding quality. A perennial leader in the category, the decadent Brut Grande Cuvée NV from Krug (95, \$169) continues its winning streak. Another standout is Charles Heidsieck's finely balanced and mouthwatering Brut Réserve NV (93, \$65), a bottling that offers consistent quality from year to year. And it's hard to beat the quality-to-price ratio of Nicolas Feuillatte's Brut Réserve NV (90, \$66), a fresh and creamy aperitif.

Despite the success of these wines and others, my tastings reveal a dip in the overall quality of the non-vintage offerings currently available. About 20 percent of the non-vintage Champagnes under

WINESPECTATOR.COM

BONUS VIDEOS: Learn more about Champagne with senior editor Alison Napjus and three of the region's most prestigious houses: Krug, Taittinger and Duval-Leroy. Watch these and more at www.winespectator.com/121516.

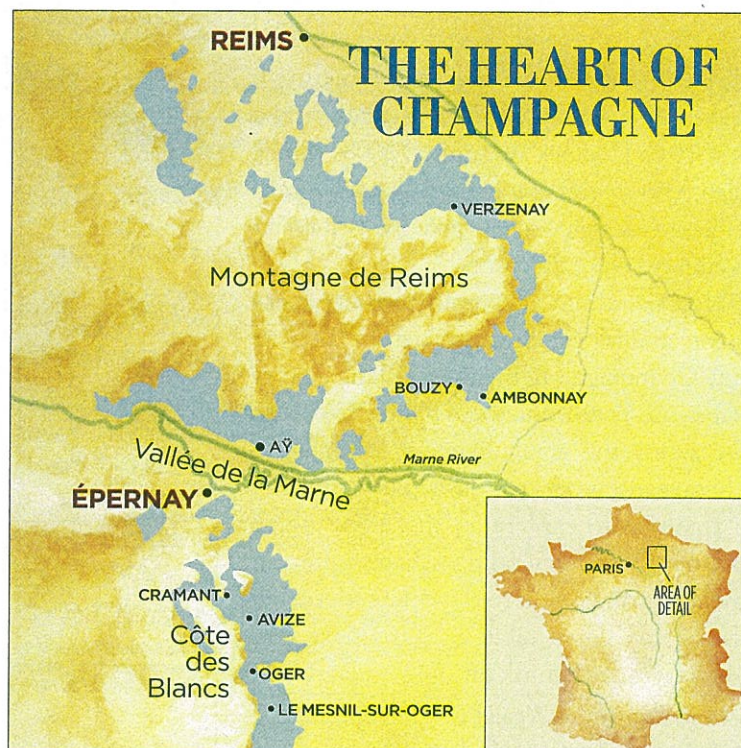
review rated less than 90 points, roughly double the number in last year's report. These are by no means undrinkable wines, but they lack some of the length, complexity or textural finesse exhibited by many of their peers. In most cases, this is probably due to a reliance on a weaker base vintage, such as 2010 or 2011, but it's also possible that some of the new labels arriving in the U.S. market don't represent the best of what's being produced in Champagne.

Vintage-dated Champagnes typically offer a surer path, though they receive much less attention stateside. Prestige cuvées, most of them vintage bottlings, are experiencing an increase in sales and popularity at the high end, yet it's my opinion that where vintage Champagne really shines is at lower price points. Non-vintage Champagne starts at about \$40 to \$45 per bottle, with most versions available for \$100 or less. By comparison, vintage-dated Champagne starts for not much more—at around \$50 to \$60 per bottle—and about half of all the vintage bottlings I reviewed this year (including prestige cuvées) are available for \$100 or less.

In the past, vintage Champagne was only produced in the very best years. Today, a good producer can make a vintage-dated Champagne from almost every harvest, although like any wine region, Champagne still experiences ups and downs in its growing seasons. Because Champagne producers each have their own aging regimen, the marketplace carries recently released bottlings from multiple vintages. My annual tastings, however, typically center around a particular year, and this year it's 2008, an outstanding vintage that includes some excellent examples of the type of wines that consumers should seek out in vintage Champagne, offering high quality at a fair price.

Veuve Clicquot has a strong showing with its elegant 2008 Brut (93, \$75) and its expressive 2008 Brut Rosé (93, \$85). The lithe and lacy Michel Gonet Brut Blanc de Blancs Charles-Gilbert de Vindé 2008 (93, \$65) offers solid value, as does René Geoffroy's aromatic Brut Empreinte 2008 (92, \$60).

The 2008 vintage was by no means a sure thing for winemakers. After harvest that year, Louis Roederer *chef de cave* Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon summed up 2008 as "the battle between man and mold."



Alison Napjus' Recommended Champagnes

More than 350 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at www.winespectator.com/121516. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

VINTAGE CHAMPAGNES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
KRUG Brut Champagne 2002 This beautiful version leads with ground clove, coffee liqueur and mandarin orange peel aromas, adding crystallized honey, dried cherry, acacia blossom and toasted brioche notes on the expansive palate.	96	\$259
MOËT & CHANDON Brut Champagne Dom Pérignon 2006 A graceful, minerally version, featuring rich notes of smoke, mandarin orange peel and chalk that lead to subtle accents of crème de cassis, toasted almond, espresso and star anise on the fine, creamy mousse.	95	\$165
PIERRE PÉTERS Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne Les Chétilons Cuvée Spéciale 2008 This harmonious Champagne offers fine interplay between power and finesse, with ripe poached apricot, rich lemon meringue pie and spun honey flavors married to chalky minerality and focused acidity.	95	\$140
PIPER-HEIDSIECK Brut Rosé Champagne Rare 2007 Toasted brioche and ripe blackberry notes leap from the glass. Glides like raw silk on the palate, with a deftly woven mix of dried white cherry, spun honey, baking spice and blood orange zest flavors.	95	\$450
LOUIS ROEDERER Brut Champagne Cristal 2009 White peach and acacia blossom aromas accent the flavors of poached apple, gingersnap biscuit, pastry cream and spun honey in this harmonious Champagne. The satiny mousse caresses the palate.	95	\$250
RUINART Brut Rosé Champagne Dom Ruinart 2002 This is subtle up front, showing delicate aromas and flavors of pink grapefruit granita, pickled ginger, spun honey and biscuit.	95	\$350
VILMART Brut Champagne Coeur de Cuvée 2007 This expressive version offers a rich tapestry of baked currant, ground anise, clove, kumquat, fruitcake and toasted coconut flavors.	95	\$150
BÉRÊCHE & FILS Champagne Le Cran 2008 Finely knit, with a plush texture to the layers of blackberry, smoked almond, honey, ground ginger and candied kumquat on the palate.	94	\$112
DEUTZ Brut Champagne Amour de Deutz 2008 Firm and smoky, with pastry dough and golden raisin flavors accented by glazed apricot and preserved lemon. Creamy and balanced.	94	\$93 375ml
CHARLES ELLNER Brut Champagne Séduction 2006 Ripe quince, honey, lemon zest and brioche notes are layered with a chalky undertow in this well-structured Champagne.	93	\$56
MICHEL GONET Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne Charles-Gilbert de Vindé 2008 Lithe and vibrant, with well-meshed flavors of Gala apple, slivered almond, white peach and Meyer lemon zest on a creamy mousse.	93	\$65
MOËT & CHANDON Brut Rosé Champagne Grand Vintage 2008 Hints of honey and toast enrich crushed black cherry, raspberry, singed orange peel, mineral and licorice flavors in this bright rosé.	93	\$70
PHILIPPONNAT Brut Blanc de Noirs Champagne 2009 Leesy on the nose, this is tightly knit, layering flavors of crushed white cherry, pastry dough, kumquat and spice with a chalky underpinning.	93	\$70
VEUVE CLICQUOT Brut Champagne 2008 Very elegant, this is chiseled by racy acidity, offering flavors of crème de cassis, preserved lemon, biscuit and dried apricot. Long and lacy.	93	\$75
RENÉ GEOFFROY Brut Champagne Empreinte 2008 Spring forest and pastry dough notes show in this firmly cut version. Crackling acidity creates a mouthwatering frame for the flavors.	92	\$60

NON-VINTAGE CHAMPAGNES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
KRUG Brut Champagne Grande Cuvée NV Shows a lovely sense of finesse, with firm acidity deftly married to a rich profile of crème de cassis, toasted brioche and lime blossom, accented by café au lait, singed orange peel and exotic spice.	95	\$169
DOSNON Brut Rosé Champagne NV Delicate spice, floral and graphite aromas lead to flavors of white peach, fresh ginger, biscuit and lemon peel in this harmonious rosé.	93	\$60
ALFRED GRATIEN Brut Champagne NV Rich, with hints of brioche and honey accenting the patisserie apple, mandarin orange peel and candied ginger flavors.	93	\$50
CHARLES HEIDSIECK Brut Champagne Réserve NV This vibrant version shows a range of toasted brioche, baked cherry, crystallized honey, grated ginger and coconut flavors.	93	\$65
HENRIOT Brut Rosé Champagne NV A beautiful range of aromatic spices accents the white raspberry, pastry and pink grapefruit notes in this harmonious rosé.	93	\$70
BÉRÊCHE & FILS Brut Champagne Réserve NV Racy acidity and chalk-tinged minerality define this sleek Champagne, while the fine, satiny mousse imparts a sense of finesse.	92	\$46
CHARTOGNE-TAILLET Brut Rosé Champagne NV Offers a lovely, satiny texture, with bright acidity driving flavors of ripe raspberry, slivered almond, white peach and chalk.	92	\$55
PIERRE GIMONNET & FILS Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne Cuvée Cuis NV This well-cut blanc de blancs shows a chalky underpinning, layered with flavors of glazed nectarine, toasted almond and candied ginger.	92	\$50
POL ROGER Brut Champagne Réserve NV An elegant Champagne, with a smoky, minerally underpinning and subtle flavors of poached pear, toast, candied lemon zest and ginger.	92	\$50
J.L. VERGNON Extra Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne Eloquence NV Firm acidity structures this mouthwatering Champagne, yet there's a fine, lacy quality to the mousse that softens the overall impression.	92	\$50
CHARLES ELLNER Brut Champagne Carte Blanche NV Austere at first, with rapier acidity, this offers intense flavors of black currant, slivered almond, white peach and candied lemon peel.	91	\$30
PLOYEZ-JACQUEMART Brut Champagne Extra Quality NV Finely knit, this creamy Champagne shows expressive flavors of glazed apricot, lemon curd, orchard blossom and pastry dough.	91	\$43
NICOLAS FEUILLATTE Brut Champagne Réserve NV Ripe and juicy, with crème de cassis and Honeycrisp apple fruit flavors accented by details of honey, smoke and biscuit.	90	\$36
JACQUART Brut Champagne Mosaïque NV An easy-drinking crowd-pleaser, balanced and accessible, with notes of crushed blackberry, candied ginger, lemon zest and cream.	90	\$45
G.H. MUMM Brut Champagne Cordon Rouge NV Almost crunchy in texture, showing harmony to the flavors of white peach, grated ginger, clover honey and candied lemon zest.	90	\$45
PERRIER-JOUËT Brut Champagne Grand Brut NV Lively, with flavors of black currant, graphite, candied lemon zest and smoky mineral, supported by a creamy mousse.	90	\$48



Deutz president Fabrice Rosset (left) and *chef de cave* Michel Davesne taste high-acid still wines as bases for their vintage-dated cuvées, such as this report's 2008 Amour de Deutz.

The damp start to the growing season promoted the spread of oidium and mildew in vineyards throughout the region. But constant vineyard management, along with drier conditions in August and beautiful sunny weather in September, saved the day. In general, those who decided to produce a vintage Champagne in 2008 did the work in the vineyards, and the resulting wines show well-structured, acidic frames and should drink nicely over the next 10 to 15 years. Additional 2008s will be released over the coming year, but I've now reviewed enough wines to give the vintage an overall rating of 92 points.

Most sparkling wines aspire to rival Champagne, and for good reason. Year in and year out, Champagne delivers excellent quality across-the-board, and today's wine lovers can also enjoy the great diversity available as Champagne producers push the boundaries of tradition to explore all that their region can offer, recommending Champagne not only in its traditional role at celebrations, but also at the dinner table or as the next glass you sit with and think on.

Senior editor Alison Napjus is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of Champagne.

Rating Champagne Vintages

2008	92	Top producers overcame disease during the growing season to make fresh and well-structured wines in a classic style	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2007	89	Due to the challenging growing season few houses declared this vintage; top producers offer fresh, accessible versions	<i>Drink</i>
2006	93	Well-structured and generous; the best offer fine integration and expression	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2005	90	Open-knit and approachable versions capable of short-term cellaring; Chardonnay fared best	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2004	92	An abundant harvest; sleek and vibrant in style, particularly for Chardonnay	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2003	88	Few houses declared this torrid vintage, with little Chardonnay produced; the best are sumptuous, but some inconsistency	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2002	94	The best year since 1996, with complexity and richness backed by firm, lively structures; the finest will repay cellaring	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2000	89	The top examples are balanced, with vibrant structures and finesse; medium- to full-bodied	<i>Drink or hold</i>
1999	89	Ripe, healthy grapes made generous wines; round and fresh despite low acidity	<i>Drink</i>
1998	91	Rich, elegant wines, with good balance and intensity	<i>Drink or hold</i>
1996	96	Ripe and intense; firmly structured and potentially long-lived	<i>Drink or hold</i>
1995	94	Rich, generous and balanced; very successful for Chardonnay	<i>Drink or hold</i>
1990	97	Big, powerful and full-flavored	<i>Drink or hold</i>

Notable older vintages: 1989, 1988, 1985, 1982, 1973, 1971, 1964, 1961, 1959, 1953, 1949

A score range indicates preliminary analysis based on barrel samples and/or a limited sampling; many wines of the vintage not yet reviewed.

Vintage ratings: 95-100, classic; 90-94, outstanding; 85-89, very good; 80-84, good; 75-79, mediocre; 50-74, not recommended **Drinkability:** "Drink" means most of the wines of the vintage are ready to drink; "hold" means most of the ageworthy wines have yet to fully mature.