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Burgundy of dreams

THE CHARDONNAY ISSUE

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Blanc canvas

Blancs de blancs are the lightest and most elegant of Champagnes, their vivacious, cool mineral character making for a particularly fine apéritif. Now the style is yielding some of the most compelling fizz right across the world, says Essi Avellan MW

The vineyards of Ferrari in Italy's Trentino, whose Chardonnay yields a 'radiantly fresh and fruity' blanc de blancs

The name blanc de blancs translates simply as ‘white of whites’ – a white wine made from white-skinned varieties. A peculiar term like that could only have been born in a region like Champagne, where production has historically been dominated by dark-skinned varieties, and where blancs de blancs are invariably made from Chardonnay. Even today, one rarely sees the term in Spain, for example, where the varieties used to make white Cava were traditionally all white. But several other regions have adopted the term to indicate a pure Chardonnay style. Based on climate, soil and winemaking, these blancs de blancs come in a multitude of different styles.

A Champagne blanc de blancs is often lemony and linear, even bony in structure, with noticeable acidity, whereas a warm-climate counterpart will generally be richer and rounder, with a ripe fruit profile. But differences are notable even just within Champagne’s own borders. Some of its Chardonnays come with Chablis vibes of lean, tight minerality, whereas others show more muscle and fruity power. Adding oak or extended lees aging to the equation yields a resemblance to fuller white Burgundies, while, over time, prime examples reveal Chardonnay’s ageing potential via toasty notes and a caressing, creamy character.

Although 30% of Champagne is now planted to Chardonnay, the variety remains a relative newcomer, having only been rooted in its chalky terroirs since the mid-19th century. Chardonnay added freshness and finesse to the blends, which until then were dominated by dark-skinned varieties. Yet it was not until the 1920s that Eugène-Aimé Salon’s prestigious monocru bottling made the Chardonnay-only style famous – and even then, it wasn’t until the 1971 vintage that the term ‘blanc de blancs’ graced the Salon label. By then, the 1960s had brought a greater profile for the term, via the launch of *grandes marques*’ prestige cuvées from Taittinger (whose first vintage of Comtes de Champagne came in 1952) and Ruinart (whose Dom Ruinart arrived in 1959).

Champagne’s Chardonnays come in myriad expressions, depending on which parts of the region they hail from. The chalkiest locations, with east- or southeast-facing slopes, tend to favour the variety. Success on such sites has meant that the Côte des Blancs is now planted almost exclusively (97%) to Chardonnay, leading its growers to produce blanc de blancs almost by default and making the style vastly more popular than its blanc de noirs dark-grape counterpart.

The Côte des Blancs’ most prestigious origins – the four grands crus that follow each other on the gently sloping ridge running

north to south – each have their particularities. A blanc de blancs from Cramant is capable of incredible finesse in a seemingly light style. Due south, Avize is prized for the completeness and harmony of its wines, perfectly combining elegance and intensity. Further south still, Oger delivers even more fruity power and strength. But it is in Le Mesnil-sur-Oger where blanc de blancs arguably reaches its greatest puissance and longevity, as seen in such legends as Salon and Krug’s Clos du Mesnil.

The immense success of Côte des Blancs Chardonnay has boosted the variety’s plantings also in the more southernly Côte de Sézanne, a region where Chardonnay appears richer and rounder due to its heavier soils. Softer and more approachable earlier, the wines make ideal blending partners, cleverly used in their non-vintage blanc de blancs cuvées by houses such as Palmer & Co and Ruinart. Sézannais growers, too, such as Marie Copinet and Domaine Collet, are making increasing noise with their deliciously fruity and supple bubbles.

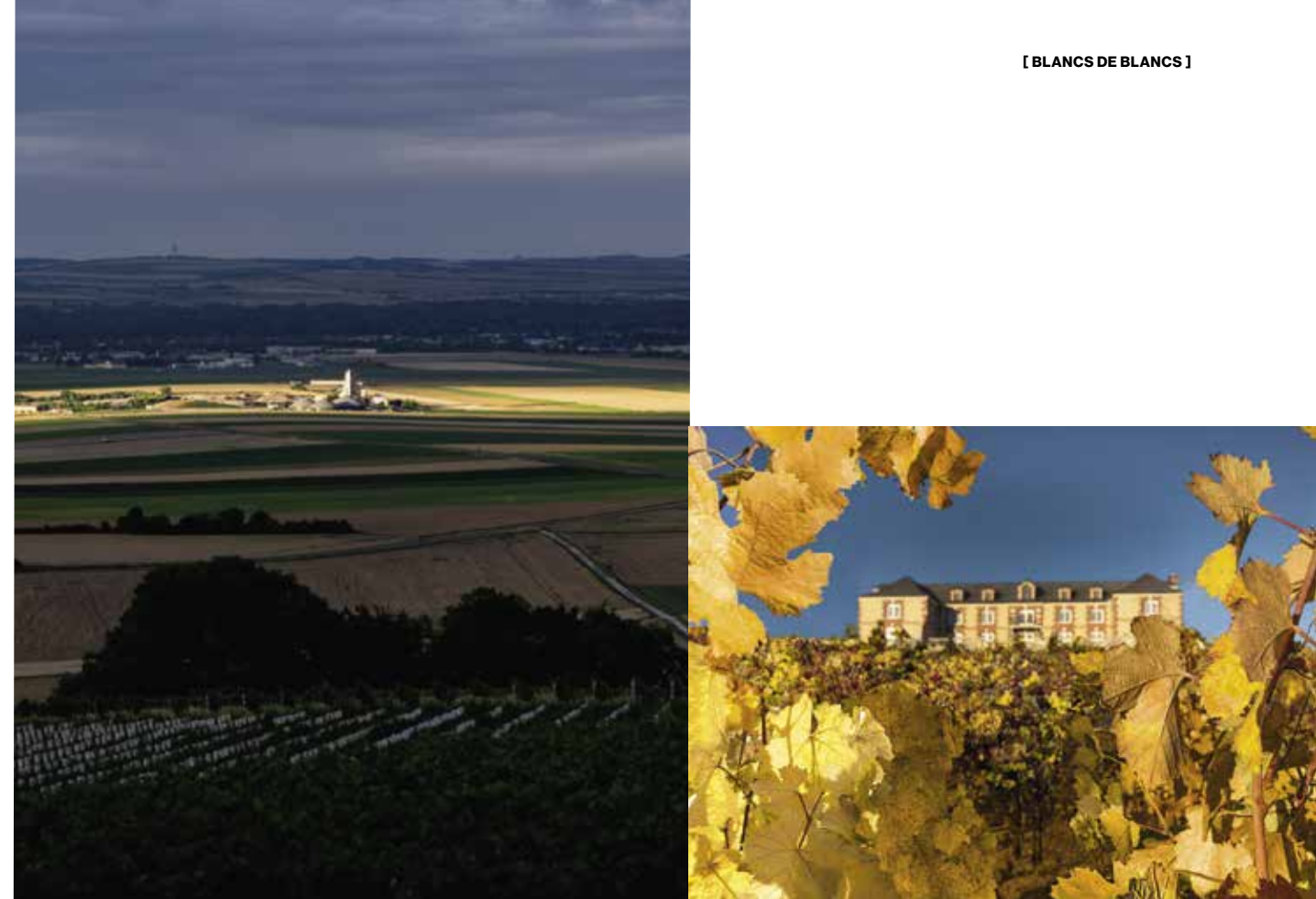
Several other subregions also specialize in Chardonnay, with Monts de Berru, just east of Reims, and Vitryat, further southeast, both up-and-coming spots. But the most majestic Chardonnay region outside the Côte des Blancs is the hillside of Montgueux, just west of Troyes. Dubbed the Montrachet of Champagne by the late Daniel Thibault of Charles Heidseick and Piper-Heidsieck, the region creates exotic, spicy and structured blancs de blancs that are in great demand by many négociants. Thus far, one grower, Jacques Lassaigne, has almost singlehandedly established a name for this special terroir, though the area has the capacity for many more to emerge; Champagne’s intended expansion incorporates several villages in the vicinity.

Chardonnay-dominant areas aside, one should not forget the blanc de blancs potential of Montagne de Reims, typically famed for its Pinot Noir. Its east-facing villages such as Trépail and Villers-Marmery produce firm and elegantly spicy blancs de blancs, with A Margaine and Henriët-Bazin among the go-to names. There are even some Pinot Noir grands crus that can produce majestic Chardonnay; Sillery and Verzy are worthy of inclusion in the Dom Ruinart Blanc de Blancs blend.

Even if almost all of Champagne’s blancs de blancs are Chardonnays, this is by no means obligatory. Blancs de blancs can be made of any permitted white-skinned variety. Petit Meslier, Arbane and Pinot Blanc make up less than 0.3% of Champagne plantings, but one can find blanc de blancs cuvées including them, especially in the Côte des Bar – witness that of Domaine Alexandre Bonnet or Drappier’s Quattuor Blanc de Quatre Blancs.

Beyond Champagne, just as the world’s best sparkling wines have all taken inspiration from the region – be it by adapting the traditional method or using the classic Champagne varieties – so, too, are producers now harnessing the blanc de blancs formula to build a global recognition for the style.

Italy has been at the forefront of the move, with Chardonnay dominating the vineyards of Lombardy’s Franciacorta, where a rich and textured style excels in the gently bubbling version



Anti-clockwise from above: Montgueux is a shining light of Champagne, especially in the hands of Jacques Lassaigne; the Drappier family is among those pushing the envelope with blanc de blancs Champagne; Domaine Carneros in California



MICHAEL BOUDOT; PHILIPPE MARTINEAU; AVIS MANDEL



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called Satèn (which may include up to 50% Pinot Blanc). Meanwhile, Trentino's radiantly fruity and fresh Trentodoc, which comes from high-altitude Chardonnay vineyards, is such a haven for the variety that the area's leading producer, Ferrari, relies on pure Chardonnay expression in most of its wines.

Farther afield, South Africa might not possess a naturally favourable climate for sparkling-wine making, but Graham Beck's creamy-rich Blanc de Blancs is one example of exciting *cap classiques*. It's also a shame that more US fizz doesn't cross the Atlantic, since California has so much to offer, be it Taittinger's yeast-complexed Domaine Carneros Le Rêve Blanc de Blancs or Schramsberg's opulently fruity and vinous version. But of all

the New World contenders, Tasmania's House of Arras makes a blanc de blancs so complex that it is hard to rival.

That said, when it comes to inspiring newcomers around the sparkling wine world, the triumph of England is surely impossible to beat. Chardonnay seems to do particularly well in the UK's knife-edge climate, and since the onset of a more modern approach, the country's lean, vibrantly lemony and zingy – even razor-sharp – blancs de blancs have built a great following. Now we are seeing exciting new ventures popping up in even more unexpected places (Carassia of Romania and Midalidare of Bulgaria have already established some success with their blancs de blancs). Long may it continue...

Six blancs de blancs worth seeking out



90

Pierre Péters, Cuvée de Réserve Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru, Champagne NV

Drink 2022–27

The perfect stepping stone to the world of Côte des Blancs Chardonnay. Originating exclusively from the grands crus villages, it marries stylish steely linearity with delicious, minerally spiced fruit. With Rodolphe Péters's complex recipe of reserve-wine additions, this already shows plenty of ageing layers. A highly enjoyable, zesty whole, finishing on a dry and pure fruity note. 12%

From £47 Berry Bros & Rudd, The Finest Bubble, Hedonism Wines, Harrods

92

A Margaine, Special Club, Champagne 2013

Drink 2022–30

This is the most majestic Chardonnay expression of Montagne de Reims's Villers-Marmery. Despite 2013 being a cool year, the sumptuous fruitiness shines brightly, giving both ripe fruity tones and classy spicy whiffs. It is a blend from the house's top vineyards, where skilful use of oak brings an edge of firmness. Impressively intense yet linear and driven, this structured wine will benefit from further cellaring. 12%

£68 Bubbleshop

90

Jacques Lassaigne, Les Vignes de Montgueux Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut, Champagne NV

Drink 2022–26

The starting point to the Emmanuel Lassaigne range, this broad blend from vineyards around Montgueux gives a great idea of what this chalky hillside has to offer. It comes with appealing breadth and fruity roundness, but towards the back palate a salty minerality surfaces. The expressive wine of generous, ripe fruity profile finishes neat and very dry – perfectly appetizing. 12%

From £54.80 The Good Wine Shop, Hedonism Wines

90

Ferrari, Perlé Bianco Riserva, Trentodoc, Italy 2015

Drink 2022–30

From one vintage to another, Perlé Bianco delivers a beautifully creamy and toasty expression of Trentodoc. The high-altitude vineyards secure a stunning acid line for the wine, with Ferrari's pristine winemaking taking care of the rest. Crisp, yeast-complexed lemon-and-green-apple nose; on the palate, the juicy fruitiness and brisk acidity are easy to appreciate. If you ever see one, try it in magnum. 12.5%

From £34.99 North & South Wines, Simply Wines Direct

90

House of Arras, Blanc de Blancs, Tasmania, Australia NV

Drink 2022–28

This Tasmanian house truly excels in the art of blending, with its long-standing, UK-born master blender Ed Carr able to bring praiseworthy complexity to the cuvées. The non-vintage blanc de blancs is a fine combination of fresh vibrancy and classy toasty whiffs complementing the crisp but ripe fruitiness. There is attractive volume on the creamy palate – intensity without heaviness. 12.5%

£25 Harvey Nichols

91

Gusbourne, Blanc de Blancs, England 2018

Drink 2022–32

A blend of Kent and Sussex Chardonnay from an excellent vintage; the warm year has lent a fine tropical notion to the fruitiness, made complex by attractive pastry and vanilla notes. On the palate, it is brisk and driven, with the intense fruit shining brightly. The finish is long and mouthwateringly zingy, beautifully cleansing the palate for the next sip. Worth cellaring, too. 12%

From £59 The Finest Bubble, Gusbourne, Hedonism Wines