

# JON BONNÉ

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# Bubbles to match your style

Are you what you drink? Champagne, more than any other wine, is drunk for the label, and if you're trying to make a statement, many of the best-known Champagnes don't really say much. Here's a user's guide to Champagnes that are exceptional on their own, and also mirror your own particular tastes.



Photo and illustrations by Erick Wong / The Chronicle

From left, **The Classicist**: NV Agradart 7 Crus Brut; **The Power Broker**: NV Paul Bara Brut Reserve Grand Cru; **The Contrarian**: NV Gaston Chiquet Blanc de Blancs d'Ay; **The Geek**: NV Jacquesson Cuvée No. 737 Extra Brut.



## The Classicist

The closest you get to bling is a pocket square. Because you understand that real power speaks quietly, and speaking quietly sends a message. No going against the ramparts. No peacocking, although you might indulge in an afternoon at Wilkes Bashford.

**What to drink:** Wines with no rough edges, which perfectly describes the style of **Agradart**, in the Cote des Blancs town of Avize. The **NV Agradart 7 Crus Brut** (\$46, 12%, Beaune Imports, disg. 6/14) is a perfect expression — mostly Chardonnay from seven villages (hence the name), fermented with indigenous yeasts and aged largely in old wood, it always shows polish, in this case a bit of brioche richness, a great mineral precision, a warmth to the fruit.

The wines of **Jean-Paul Hébrat** in Mareuil could easily be mistaken for far fancier names. Instead, the wines find just the right pitch, including the **NV Marc Hébrat Cuvée de Reserve Brut** (\$55, 12%, Terry Theise/Skurnik Wines, disg. 3/14), full of allspice and peppery cherry-skin fruit.

Back to Chardonnay, and the wines of **Lilbert Fils**, which hail from Cramant, known for its finesse. The **NV Lilbert Fils Blanc de Blancs Brut Grand Cru** (\$65, 12%, Vintage 59 Imports, disg. n/a) shows off this chalky, crisp aspect; it's sushi Champagne, if you will, redolent of peonies and white tea, and showing delicacy in the fruit. There's a similar tack from their neighbors at **Diebolt-Vallois**, one of the whispered names of Champagne greatness, where Jacques Diebolt crafts wines like the **NV Diebolt-Vallois Prestige Brut** (\$76, 12.5%, Martine's Wines, disg. n/a), with its subtle pastry, nori and quince aspects.

**Also look for:** Philipponnat, Marguet Pere & Fils, Janisson-Baradon, José Dhondt.



## The Minimalist

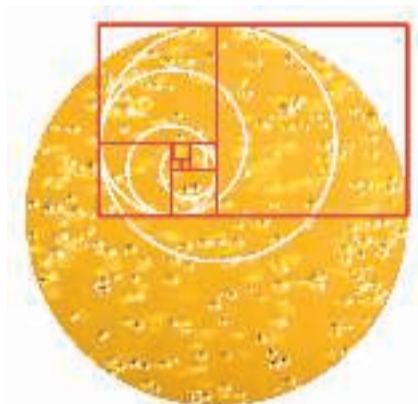
Ellsworth Kelly over Jeff Koons. Cacio e pepe over carbonara. Margiela over Versace.

**What to drink:** You want no frills, no flourish, just the cleanest of flavors. In part, that means Champagne that almost entirely eschews the typical practice of adding a bit of sugar to polish the wine: extra brut (6 or fewer grams per liter of sugar added) and brut nature (essentially no sugar added).

The most recent entrant into this realm comes from an unexpected place: the house of **Roederer**, which under Jean-Baptiste Lecaillon has become the most forward thinking of large Champagne houses. Its latest is the **2006 Louis Roederer Starck Brut Nature** (\$89, 12%, Maisons Marques & Domaines, disg. 2014), deceptively fruity at first and then utterly brisk, showing a sense of architecture and structure to the flush 2006 fruit.

This is Roederer's first new cuvee for the house in 40 years, a collaboration between the Reims-based house and designer Philippe Starck, based on Pinot Noir from a parcel in Cumieres. Many Champenois have drafted such artist collaborations (Koons and Dom Perignon, for instance) but unlike most of them, Starck wanted to be deeply involved in the winemaking — and wanted a wine without any added sugar. Roederer obliged.

**Also look for:** Drappier Brut Nature Sans Soufre, Veuve Fourny Brut Nature, Egly-Ouriet V.P.



## The Geek

You can name every Chez Panisse alum now heading her own restaurant. You know exactly who sells Honduran single-origin coffee (though you'd rather roast your own). So when you go for Champagne, you want to know all the details, like whether the wine's finished with sugar or concentrated grape must.

**What to drink:** How do you react to success? If you're the Chiquet brothers (different from Gaston Chiquet) and you run the lauded house of **Jacqueson**, in Dizy, you take the Champagne tradition of blending a consistent non-vintage wine and turn it on its head. This is what they've done since 2000 (beginning with Cuvée 728), offering as their standard wine a blend that highlights one vintage rather than a uniform style. The latest **NV Jacquesson Cuvée No. 737 Extra Brut** (\$75, 12%, Vintage 59 Imports, disg. 11/13) is honeyed and spicy, a mix of the 2009 vintage's majesty with honeyed, spicy aspects from older reserve wines.

Not fringe enough? There's always the 2009 vintage of the **Aubry Le Nombre d'Or Campanae Veteres Vites**, the best vintage I've yet had of this blend from Jouy-les-Reims' Aubry brothers, which combines Champagne's three major grapes with the rest of the ensemble: Petit Meslier, Arbanne, and Pinots Blanc and Gris. **Laherte's 7 Cepages** is in a similar vein, and with a hunt you might uncover a bottle of **Moutard's Cuvée Arbanne Vieilles Vignes**, possibly the only solo bottling of that archaic grape.

**Also look for:** Olivier Horiot, Nathalie Falmet, Marie-Noelle Ledru.



## The Ecologist

For you, zero waste is the starting goal. You live for the day organic standards will finally get tightened. Able to compost in your sleep and save the snowy plover during your kombucha break.

**What to drink:** Champagne doesn't exactly have a stellar track record on ecology, even with the unveiling of new (largely self-policed) standards this year. The conventional wisdom has been that France's northerly region is too wet and damp for organics, but an expanding number of producers are disproving that, including the major house of **Louis Roederer**, which is converting its vineyards to biodynamics.

In the southern Aube region, **Fleury** was a biodynamic pioneer; its **NV Fleury Blanc de Noirs Brut** (\$40, 12.5% alcohol, Gregory Condes Wines, disg. 11/13 [lot L20071110]) shows a crackery, plummy side to Pinot Noir. Taking that even farther is **Benoit Lahaye** in Bouzy, whose vineyard is not only certified biodynamic but who plows several acres by horse; his Rosé de Maceration Brut is a soulful take on pink. Then there's **Emmanuel Brochet** and his organically farmed Le Mont Benoit; Brochet is so concerned about the region's heavy chemical use that each bottle notes it was tested by a lab and "contains no pesticide residues."

**Also look for:** Larmandier-Bernier, Georges Laval, Duval-Leroy Brut AB, Tarlant.



## The Power Broker

Life is intense, *cherie*. Why yoga when you can CrossFit? Why type B when you could type A? You take your Bruichladdich neat at the Battery, because what's the point of dilution? Your wines require intensity — aggressive flavors, aggressive bubbles.

**What to drink:** It took me years to come to terms with Chantale Bara's wines; they take no prisoners. Whomping Bouzy fruit, no malolactic fermentation to soften the Pinot Noir-dominant cuvees. Case in point, the **NV Paul Bara Brut Reserve Grand Cru** (\$57, 12%, Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant), with its hibiscus tang and steely edge. Same with the Bara Rosé.

For that matter, the Chardonnay-driven wines of Vertus don't necessarily have to be opulent. While in past years the **Veuve Fourny** wines struck me as a bit mild, that's not a concern with the new release of the **NV Veuve Fourny & Fils Grande Reserve Brut Premier Cru** (\$47, 12%, Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant, disg. 2/14). It has a remarkable starkness, white-pepper spice and crushed-seashell minerality — a Chardonnay with zero body fat.

**Also look for:** Gosset, Bollinger's La Grande Année, Jean Vesselle, Barnaut.



## The Hedonist

You're conversant with the holy trinity: caviar, white truffles and Wagyu. If it's on your wrist, it's Patek. You think the Beaux Arts style is set for a comeback. So none of this austere, nerdy stuff; your bubbles need to be unrepentantly posh.

**What to drink:** Lucky for you, Champagne has built its entire history on making too much of a good thing. But that doesn't have to be a recipe for defaulting to Krug or Dom Perignon, even if both can deliver with aplomb. Many smaller producers share your love of opulence.

Start with rosé Champagne, which typically shows extra depth from added red wine, as in the **NV Lamiable Brut Rosé Grand Cru** (\$55, 12.5%, Robert Kacher Selections, disg. n/a), with its ripe, friendly fruit and croissant-like richness from the lesser-known town of Tours-sur-Marne (plus red wine from the grand village of Bouzy).

Or, think Chardonnay, and its Champenois home on the Cote des Blancs. In the town of Avize, **Denis Varnier** makes Chardonnay-driven wines that manage to both have precision and be totally languid (his bottles have less pressure than usual, hence are particularly sumptuous on the tongue). The single-parcel **Varnier Fanniere Cuvée Saint-Denis** (\$67, 12%, Terry Theise/Skurnik Wines, disg. 6/14) is particularly supple, full of gooseberry and pluot flavors. From nearby Vertus, try the **NV Pascal Diquet Blanc de Blancs Brut Premier Cru** (\$70, 12.5%, Robert Kacher Selections, disg. 4/08), aged six years in the bottle, which matches the southern Cote des Blancs' mineral intensity with a pie-crust opulence.

**Also look for:** Bruno Paillard, Rene Geoffroy Cuvée Volupté, vintage Pol Roger.



## See and Be Seen

Back to our original thesis: You're drinking Champagne at least in part to send a message. You understand that the world is watching your style, so yes, your Celine handbag stays on the table. While you could do it in an obvious way — Vuitton, say — you've got far better sense.

**What to drink:** The **Egly-Ouriet** wines from Ambonnay have been a cult hit for long enough — and the winery's work with oak has been controversial enough — that "Egly" telegraphs a certain poshness, for better or worse. Right now, most certainly for the better, as the latest release of the **NV Egly-Ouriet Brut Tradition Grand Cru** (\$93.50, 12.5%, North Berkeley Wine, disg. 1/14) is monumental in its flavors without being ostentatious. The richness of red fruit holds it together, with a deeply rich pastry note but also a fine-boned aspect.

The tiny production of wines from **Frederic Savart**, just outside Reims, has instantly found devotees on these shores, enough that a bottle on your table is like a furtive handshake. Look for his **L'Accomplie** bottling (\$58, Grand Cru Imports, 12%, disg. n/a), for instance, which dominates with Pinot Noir and a significant dose of older reserve wine for depth.

And while its reputation for flash precedes it — the gilded label of the **2006 Roederer Cristal** (\$249, 12%, Maisons Marques & Domaines) is as glam as you'll find — Cristal in fact remains the most impeccably subtle of the luxe cuvees; here it's interpreted through a plush, balanced vintage that's more forward than its usual shy self.

**Also look for:** Jacques Selosse, Pierre Peters L'Esprit, the Special Club bottlings from the Club Tresors ([www.clubtresorsdechampagne.com](http://www.clubtresorsdechampagne.com)).

## The Contrarian

When everyone went kale, you went collard greens. Sour candy over chocolate. Excelsior over Mission District. You can't do steampunk because real retro means the 1780s. Thus your Champagne needs to make a point. But not that point.

**What to drink:** The clear play here is to look to the **Aube**, the southern region of Champagne previously so disdained that its northern counterparts rioted a century ago to block its grapes. The Aube has been on a major upswing (<http://is.gd/aubech>), having become a home to some of Champagne's best pioneers. You'll find a number of Aube wines throughout these categories; also keep an eye out for **Dosnon & Lepage** and **Jacques Lessaigne**.

But there are many outliers in Champagne. Seek out a bottle of the **NV Gaston Chiquet Blanc de Blancs d'Ay** (\$63, 12.5%, Terry Theise/Skurnik Wines, disg. 9/13), a spicy, sinewy Chardonnay grown on a parcel in Ay — a town renowned for its powerful Pinot Noir. It comes across less as Chardonnay than simply a demonstration of the intensity found in Ay's Pinot-based wines.

You also could be drinking **Pinot Meunier**, long considered the utilitarian third grape of Champagne but recently reframed in a more serious light by people such as **Cedric Moussé**, whose winery is in the heart of the Marne Valley in Cuisles but specializes in Meunier; his **NV Moussé Fils Noire Reserve Brut** (\$57, 12%, Terry Theise/Skurnik Wines, disg. 3/13), from 85 percent Meunier, is redolent of leaves and crushed berries. The brisk, intensely fruity **2009 Laherte Freres Les Vignes d'Autrefois** (\$70, 12%, Beaune Imports, disg. 1/13) frames Meunier in the proper retro mold (its name means "the vines of yore"), from vines planted just after World War II. And should you find a rare bottle from **Jerome Prevost**, the Gueux-based leader of the Meunier revival, grab it.

**Also look for:** Drappier; Brigandat; Andre Beaufort, Chartogne-Taillet.

## The Artist

Totally right brained. You appreciate the parallels between Galway Kinnell and Seamus Heaney. Fill dinner conversations with discussions of Hockney's L.A. years. Reminisce about your Stereolab cover band.

**What to drink:** Inevitably, the making of Champagne is described as artistry. Look beyond the cliché and you can find vigneron who take that seriously — a stroke of artisanship in a region entranced with its own hype. One new arrival: **Jean-Marc Sélèque**, who works in a sort of no-man's-terroir directly south of Epernay. Sélèque's family has been in the town of Pierry for nearly 50 years, and as the latest generation, Jean-Marc wanted to make a particularly personal style of Champagne. The seven musical notes on the label of his **2008 J-M Sélèque Cuvée Partition Extra Brut** (\$85, 12.5%, Vintage 59 Imports, disg. 6/14) telegraph this quest for impressionism; they represent the seven casks from five villages used to blend this particularly expressive wine. It's slightly austere in a good, modern way — sugar melted on pink grapefruit, sea salt, crushed crackers.

You'll find equally personal wines from Bertrand Gautherot, whose **Vouette & Sorbee** wines are as minimalist as it gets: tiny parcels, biodynamically farmed, fermented with indigenous yeasts (a partial reason behind their occasionally unruly flavors). Their utter quirkiness has left them in high demand. Ditto the wines of **De Sousa & Fils** in Avize — Chardonnay-driven, assertive and unusual; a good introduction might be the **NV Zoémie De Sousa Brut Charlotte Grand Cru** (\$65, 12.5%, North Berkeley Imports, disg. n/a), from purchased fruit fermented in oak casks; its precise flavors come into focus after 45 minutes in a decanter. (Yes, you can decant Champagne.)

**Also look for:** Cedric Bouchard; Gatinnois; Ulysse Collin.

## The Avant-Garde

Reservations at the State Bird team's new restaurant, the Progress? Already been. And frankly, already done with the new Caribou album. You believe that if you're not three steps ahead, you're two steps behind.

**What to drink:** Back to the Aube for a moment. The wines of **Serge Mathieu** remain sleeper hits, including his Chardonnay-fueled **Tete de Cuvée Select Brut** and **Tradition Pur Pinot Blanc de Noirs**.

If the Aube seems like old news, there's always the hills just outside Epernay (see also Sélèque, in "The Artist"), never paid much heed until now. That's where the Laherte family owns many of its small parcels. The Meunier-driven **NV Laherte Freres Ultradition Grand Brut Champagne** (\$40, 12%, Beaune Imports, disg. 9/13) is a perfect introduction, with its laser focus: toasted barley, black walnut and a raft of fruit.

Or, if you're a fan of the dramatic wines of Mesnil, but aren't down with Salon or Krug's Clos du Mesnil, you've already stashed away the wines of **J.L. Vergnon**, particularly the **Cuvee Confidence**, made entirely from Mesnil fruit.

**Also look for:** Lelarge-Pugeot, Pierre Gerbaix, R. Pouillon & Fils.

**Note:** Because Champagne is often made from multiple vintages, we've listed disgorgement dates when available, in addition to price, alcohol level and importer, to indicate which version of the wine I've recommended. As vintage Champagnes typically are a single blend from one year, many don't list disgorgement dates.



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