

CHAMPAGNE OCTOBER 2004

As a sort of protestant penance for pleasures past, the task of describing our last travelling tipple falls into my lap again. Don't look for any facts here, though. If you want to learn anything, go straight to Daniel's tasting notes.

Yes, debonair swilling guru Daniel passed the baton to Robert Tixier this time. Robert, a "communicator" is well known for his connections in Champagne, where he has a few clients. He is also known for his endless supply of blue Lacoste shirts (it was only when I saw them all on the line once that I realised he had more than one) and his wry smile, a perpetually quizzical look suggesting that he knows a bigger secret than any of us even knows exists.



Robert...



and his shirts

Champagne. You have to give it to them. Thanks to Dom Pérignon, the Champenois have managed to turn a dry harsh white wine grown far too north to be any good into the world's favourite fizz. And the area is as ritzy as the socialites and wanabees across all continents who love to be seen hurling it down their slender, glittering throats. A bare hour beyond the towers of Paris's eastern sprawl, Champagne purrs its little world of wide views, genteel forests, solid comfortable houses and late model BMWs with typical French discretion. Wealth seems imprinted in the genes here.

If the global wine crisis has them pouting and shrugging in most of Bordeaux and along the Loire and Rhone valleys, up here in Champagne you're more likely to find the cautious, somewhat edgy reserve that has become a character trait of anyone comfortable in France since the Revolution, the credo of which (*liberté, égalité et fraternité*) has to be extended to include *fiscalité*. No one likes the taxman, but here in France, it's the national bloodsport. And shy the Champenois may be of the taxman, for 2004 was the first year ever in which more than 300 million bottles of champagne were shipped for current consumption (the bumper 1999 supply of 327 million bottles was being stocked for the millennial celebrations). You might have guessed it: the Chinese are starting to get a taste for it, and if oil is any guide, the price per barrel will go off the scale before too long.

But our first winemaker, Jérôme Prévost, who farms a mere 2.2 hectares (5 acres) not far from the freeway just west of Reims, and produces the grand total of 6000 bottles, is not likely to lose too much sleep over the taxman's knock on the door. The whole champagne-making thing is as complicated as anything in France, so the Anglo-Saxons among us might want to take a deep breath now. I did my best out there in the field to appear captivated while he ran us through the various grape varieties they use. Unlike just about everyone else, though, he uses only one variety, grown on one soil type and made with one process. But when he started

on how the industry works, even the French among us were squinting. Apparently, a good half of Champagne growers have the mere equivalent of a football oval's worth of vines and most have second jobs. And, amidst all those French artisans, we have the billionaire conglomerates like Mercier and Moët that we all know and love.



Jérôme Prévost....



and Anne taking a rest

We were strolling back to our cars through the streets of his village when he rushed ahead. We found him by a little doorway sunk into an old wall. One by one we jumped down to a sort of drain, and took turns to duck under the sill and into his cellar, in which a couple of dozen wooden barrels were bubbling away. This is dangerous work, as the carbon dioxide can kill you. I'm not kidding. It takes out one or two winemakers a year.

He had bottled some of his 2003 for us. It was at the end of its second fermentation and was still turbid. It was hardly flattering. His 2002 was clear, crisp and fresh. A good start.

We entered the world of Chardonnay after lunch, where they make white wine (Blanc de Blanc) from white wine grapes. What? Yes, well: champagne can come from red grapes too, the famed pinot noir. It's just that once they have pressed the juice out, they get it away from the skins pronto. Anyway, we were now in Avize a good forty kilometres south of Jérôme Prévost's country near Reims. Pascal Agrapart of the eponymous chateau took us out to his vines, incongruously adjacent to neglected bush in which some forlorn heavy machinery had been abandoned. A solid fellow in polo shirt and designer jeans, he took us again through the various varieties you find in champers. I was starting to wonder. French winemakers generally snub discussion about grape varieties, focussing instead on the *terroir* on which the stuff is grown. So, why are they more relaxed about it here? Perhaps they are under less attack from the New World than the red wine makers, so don't need to vaunt the specificity of their soil so much. Anyway, there was no discussion about the upstarts this weekend. Everybody knows that you can only make champagne in Champagne, even if it's just for legal reasons.



Pascal Agrapart....



and Champagne's vinyards

I have still not quite sorted out everything in life. Spittoons are such a conundrum. I find it hard to swill and spit, don't you? I know that we are all supposed to be moderate these days, but I'm all for a bit of moderation in this moderation. And spitting Champagne, please! Pascal decided this one for us. No spittoons in sight. Spit it down your throats, he said. As I consult my notes here, I realise that they are particularly vague: "dry", "good" and "fresh" don't help me remember much. Apparently Robert Parker drinks with a Dictaphone in his other hand. He was a lawyer once, too.

Mme Tarlant is a proud woman. At Chateau Tarlant, where we arrived late in the afternoon, she guided us to an old press turned into a table, and talked less of her wine than her family. Yes, she's proud that her family has been making wine since 1687. They use a heap of varieties on different soils. From Provost to here, we'd gone from one extreme to the other. Her first was as dry as a desert. My notes say the second was "a real wine". Hmm. I seem to have enjoyed that one.

Robert's proclivity for blue Lacostes masks a certain degree of stylishness, and he had booked us into the fairy tale Chateau de Cuisles for the night. Space was tight. When numbers grew, someone had to go elsewhere. As Anne is the only non-drinker in our troop, it made sense that it was us, and we'd booked a small hotel in a village we thought was close. As it transpired, there would have been room for us at Cuisles after all. After six years here, I've learned to shrug...

It seems that the Chateau had been entrusted to the grandson, a smart "you-can-do-anything-if-you-really-want-to" type, together with, I suspect, a nice fat chequebook. The taste was, umm, "magazine eclectic". Not that I should cringe at Moroccan style tadelak on the walls of French renaissance chateaux these post-modern days. The food was a bit of a mess, too.

The next morning...

France has its three star features and even a few boring landscapes. But mostly, it is just incorrigibly aesthetic. Producing food here is incidental. Farmers exist in France to keep the country well tended: the global farming debate that poisons relations between Europe and Australia is mainly about keeping France cute. Stone houses, little copses, sleepy villages, that sort of thing. We felt like skivers from school driving back to the others that morning, on our little trip within a trip. We took a bag of chocolate croissants from a bakery in one lost little village – a bakery to boggle yuppies in any major city in the world - into the bar next door for breakfast.

Once reassembled, the group descended on Ruinart, one of the real biggies (its name, when the syllables are separated, reminded me of Andy Warhol for some strange reason) and parked our cars on a wide lawn under massive trees in their park. Blonded receptionists in suits smiled as trained. The young woman assigned to us, a walking PowerPoint presentation, lifted her eyebrows to insert bullet points at the start of her sentences and made full stops with her smile. This place is unconditionally, and non-too discreetly, rich. Their 8 kilometres of galleries, 24 metres deep, connect numerous large funnel-shaped Roman and medieval underground quarries, whose spouts reach up to the surface from where a little light filters through.



It makes sense. Ruinart is owned by the wonderful LVMH, which brings us those charming Louis Vuitton bags. They slugged us 13 Euros each for two glasses of presentable but corporate-friendly wine, too. Good for receptions. But we needed to go there, if only to see what the Jérôme Prévosts of this world are up against.

As if to prove that corporate doesn't always mean snide, our next and last place, Taittinger, made up for Ruinart with a comprehensive and generous tasting. From the marble and brass reception with its inserted halogens and original Vasarely paintings, a bean-thin grandmotherly lady in ochre colours and a silk scarf took us to a small theatre to watch a promo. Along one side, a curved glass wall showcased a few barrels – a PR thing, as she admitted herself. They hardly use any wood. She proved to be as knowledgeable as she was genuine, and took her time to guide us through endless bottles to see if we were “Taittinger”. By the end of our session in their special tasting lab, with glasses strewn in all directions, we were pretty convinced that we fitted in. She even gave us a bottle each to take away at the end.



Daniel collecting facts



Neighbour Pierre

Lincoln Siliakus