



Champagne Coups

Chef Alan Tardi visits the home soils of France's fabled sparkling wine for tête-à-têtes with grower-producers about pairing their cuvées with local cuisine and foodstuffs. Photos by Beatriz da Costa. ▶

Louis
1990





For centuries, the production of one of the world's most iconic wines—Champagne—has rested squarely in the hands of a relatively small group of large producers who source grapes or grape juice to blend and bottle under their own label. The reasons are easy to understand. The complicated Méthode Champenoise (which involves chaptalization to boost the alcohol, second fermentation in bottle to make it sparkle, extended aging in underground cellars, and disgorgement to remove sediment) requires substantial expertise and capital resources. Due to great variations in the quality and volume of each year's harvest in this volatile northern region, it became common practice for large producers to obtain grapes from many different areas to blend into a consistent house style, and even lay away substantial stocks of still wine in good years to make up for potential future shortfalls. When international demand for the bubbly began to explode in the 19th century, the market was rife with counterfeits: a wine masquerading as "Champagne" could come from just about anywhere and be doctored up with a host of additives that had nothing whatsoever to do with grapes. In this turbid commercial free-for-all, a familiar and reputable name on the label was the only reliable assurance of a certain level of quality.

Once these *Grandes Marques* were established, they maintained their grasp on the reigns of the industry even after strict regulations and quality controls were put in place. Historically, large houses (there are about 170 of them), who own only about 10 percent of the vineyards, produce 90 percent of the Champagne on the market, while small growers (known as *vignerons*), who own 90 percent of the vineyards, produce less than 10 percent of the wine. But this balance is shifting.

In recent years, with increasing demand for Champagne and easier access to channels of distribution, a whole new breed of small grower-producers has emerged. While grower Champagnes come from the same clearly delimited growing region and must adhere to the same strict regulations, most of them are notably different from Champagnes of the big producers. Unlike the large houses, small grower-producers grow their own grapes on their own small plots of vineyards, which (along with the fact that they are usually made in much smaller quantities) typically give their wine more individual personality, reflecting both the person who made it and the particular place the grapes come from. And this presents a whole world of interesting new possibilities for pairing Champagne with food.

To explore these possibilities, I asked three small grower-producers from the heart of the classic Champagne area of the Marne to choose their most representative Champagnes and select a few local dishes or food products to best accompany them. Here's what they came up with.

Opener: Champagne Tarlant, Terrine de Pate en Croute with Champagne "Cuvee Louis".

Top: Champagne Tarlant.

Bottom: White Asparagus with fresh herb oil with Champagne Cuvee BAM



Laherte Frères

While the grape-growing activity of Laherte Frères in the Côte des Blancs town of Chavot-Courcourt dates back to 1889, they didn't actually begin making Champagne until the 1960s. Today, all the grapes from the 10 hectare (25 acre) estate, which is made up of some 75 plots in 10 different villages, are used for their own wine. Sixth generation Aurélien Laherte, who became active in his family's winery in 2004, vinifies these parcels separately to highlight their particular characteristics. While not officially certified biodynamic, Laherte likes to use plant infusions rather than chemicals to improve the natural defense systems and perform critical activities in sync with the natural cycles of the moon.

Jambon de Reims, a local version of the Burgundian *jambon persillé* and Laherte's first course for pairing, is made by brining a shin or shoulder of pork, then cooking it slowly in an herb-infused broth until it begins to fall apart. After removing any sinew from the meat and fat from the broth, the meat and liquid are recombined, with the addition of lots of fresh parsley and spices, and poured into a mold to set. Because of the labor involved, the preparation is now usually left to charcuterie producers.

The excellent *jambon de Reims* Laherte got from Charcuterie Maingre in Épernay was packed with tender shredded meat in a richly flavored but not overly stiff gelatin liberally spiced with black pepper and generously flecked with parsley, which added a pleasant fresh herbaceous touch. And Laherte Frères' Rosé de Saignée 2011—made of 100 percent Pinot Meunier from an area called Les Beaudiers—was a perfect partner. "The clayey topsoil of Les Beaudiers gives the wine enough body to stand up to the full-flavored *jambon*," said Laherte, "the minerality from the chalky subsoil complements the parsley, and the spiciness of Meunier ties in with the black pepper."

Next we tasted two local cheeses, both made from cow's milk, and two Champagnes. Chaource, which comes from the southern portion of Champagne in the department of the Aube, is slightly dry and crumbly in texture, with a pungent, almost aggressive flavor and slight salty finish, while Brie de Meaux from the neighboring region of Ile-de-France, is rich and creamy, with a slight hint of sweetness suggestive of Golden Delicious apple and clover flowers.

Les Vignes d'Autrefois, made of barrel-fermented Pinot Meunier from vineyards planted in 1947 and 1953, is a full-throated Champagne with toasted brioche and hazelnut aromas, ripe roasted pear, and a chalky saline finish. Les 7, made from a field blend of all seven Champagne grape varieties (including all four of the so-called "lost" varieties: Arbane, Petit Meslier, Pinot Blanc, and Pinot Gris) in a sort of solera system that incorporates seven vintages, is elegant and graceful, with a delicate floral aroma, soft tropical fruit, and a long lingering finish.

When we first tasted them, the obvious match was the spicy

Top: escargots, Champagne: Extra Brut Vintage 2004/ La Grillade Gourmande, Geoffroy

Bottom: La Grillade Gourmande, Geoffroy, Champagne





Left: Laherte Freres. Right: From left: Champagne “Vin d’Autre Fois” w/ Brie de Meaux, Champagne “Les 7” with Chaource, Champagne Rose “Les Baudiers” with Jambon de Reims/ Laherte Freres

Pinot Meunier with the pungent Chaource and the delicately perfumed Les 7 with the soft creamy Brie. But then, just for the heck of it, I switched them around and this worked perfectly well, too: the low-toned Brie provided a perfect stage for Les Vignes d’Autrefois to show its stuff and the understated finesse of Les 7 undercut the rustic intensity of the Chaource without even trying to compete with it, demonstrating that there are different ways to approach food and wine pairing.

Champagne Tarlant

Louis Tarlant came to the village of Oeuilly in 1780 and planted vineyards on the banks of the Marne River, but it took four generations for another Tarlant (also named Louis) to start to make Champagne out of them in the aftermath of World War I. Today, two more generations later, Benoit Tarlant, who manages the estate of Champagne Tarlant with the help of his parents and sister Melanie, finds a perfect balance between tradition and innovation, cultivating 14 hectares (34 1/2 acres) of vineyards comprised of 55 parcels in four communes of the Marne Valley near Épernay. While each of these parcels has its own particular characteristics, all share the same Sparnacian (the name comes from the Ancient Roman name of Épernay) soil

comprised of clay, limestone, and pebbles on top of chalk subsoil along the Marne River. Besides the role it played in creating the soil, the river continues to have a moderating effect on the climate of the surrounding area.

Tarlant selected two representative wines—the classic flagship of the house and an innovative new Champagne, released for the first time in the spring of 2014—to taste with two typical dishes served by his mother. The first was a classic *pâté en croûte*. “Of course,” said Tarlant, “*pâté en croûte* is made all over France, but we have a special tradition around it here in the valley: Each fall, growers get together regularly to discuss the condition of the grapes and the dates for the upcoming harvest, and each person brings a *pâté en croûte* from home or his local charcuterie, along with a bottle of wine. Everyone argues that their *pâté* is the best. Thankfully, there’s usually much more consensus about the vines!”

Even without tasting the others, this *pâté*, from the charcuterie of Bernard Baudré in the nearby town of Dormans, would get my vote: The translucent finely ground forcemeat, perfectly spiced to bring out the flavor of the meat without covering it, was encased in a crust that was moist and fatty on the inside and flakey on top, with an etched palm-frond design that



Chavot-Courcourt, France. Laherte Freres

gave it a festive appearance.

“A rustic homey dish like this would usually be paired with a simple, slightly rough red wine,” said Tarlant, “but you could take an entirely different approach.” Sure enough, the elegantly complex Cuvée Louis, made from 50 percent Pinot Noir and 50 percent Chardonnay from the 65 year old Les Crayons vineyard, turned out to be an excellent match. A perfect expression of the Marne River valley, it had sufficient body and structure to stand up to the full-flavored pâté—even the spicy Dijon mustard and vinegary cornichons that were served with it—and enough finesse to bring the simple, rustic dish to a whole other level.

When I visited the estate, white asparagus from the nearby town of Plivot was in season and Tarlant was getting ready to debut a new wine called BAM! made of three white varieties: Pinot Blanc, Arbane, and Petit Meslier. “These ancient grapes represent a tiny part of the plantings in Champagne,” said Tarlant. “The authorities don’t really encourage them, and the big houses have little interest. But for many small grower-producers, these unusual varieties represent interesting vehicles to express their particular terroir.”

BAM! is lighter bodied, with a pleasantly floral-grassy aroma, a hint of candied grapefruit rind reminiscent of Sauvignon Blanc, and a crisp lemony finish. While the delicacy of BAM! was a bit overshadowed by the bawdiness of the pâté, it showed beautifully with a dish of blanched white asparagus drizzled with extra-virgin olive oil infused with fresh tarragon, parsley, and thyme. “I love this combination because both the asparagus and the grapes come from the same Sparnacian soil,” said Tarlant.

While asparagus (like artichokes) is usually a no-no when it comes to wine pairings, white asparagus is much less astringent than the green variety. Moreover, these were peeled

and thoroughly cooked, enhancing their earthy vegetal flavor. The light crispness of the wine echoed the fibrous texture of the asparagus, and the fresh herbs in the oil tied in with the wine’s aroma. While the herb oil was perfectly fine, I suspect a creamy béarnaise sauce would create an even better bridge.

René Geoffroy

Instead of meeting at his winery in the town of Aÿ, Jean-Baptiste Geoffroy suggested we conduct our tasting at **La Grillade Gourmande** in Épernay, where his friend, chef/owner **Christophe Bernard**, would devise the pairings. I did not object.

Bernard worked with **Paul Bocuse** and **Alain Ducasse** before coming to Champagne to head the kitchen at the Michelin-starred **La Briqueterie** in Vinay. In 2005, he decided to step out on his own: “I bought this restaurant in

Épernay that was called La Grillade, a very simple and very popular place run by **Madame Blanche**. Everyone had the same vegetable appetizer and then selected a main course prepared on the wood grill in the dining room.”

Wanting to make his mark while building on the solid reputation of the restaurant, he tacked “gourmande” onto the name, left the grill in the dining room, and, in homage to Blanche, devoted the entire first page of his menu to the grill.

Bernard’s cooking is at the same time simple and complex, relying on excellent ingredients and solid culinary practices to evoke layered flavors and textures in his dishes, resulting in food that is not only delicious but also extremely well-suited for wine pairing. (Located in one of the capitals of the Champagne region, wine is an important element of La Grillade Gourmande, and the wine list is immense.)

While the Geoffroy family has deep roots in Champagne, going back to the 17th century, the firm’s actual winemaking operations began with Jean-Baptiste’s grandfather in the aftermath of World War II. The winery has 14 hectares of vine, most of it in the Premier Cru village of Cumières, and produces 120,000 bottles per year. “For us, the most important things are soil, sub-soil, and grape variety,” said Geoffroy, “and most of our work consists in encouraging the vine roots to go deep in order to best express our different terroirs.”

Geoffroy brought three Champagnes: Empreinte Brut 2007, a classic blend of mostly Pinot Noir (76 percent) with the rest divided between Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay; an Extra-Brut Vintage 2004, consisting of 71 percent Chardonnay and 29 percent Pinot Noir; and a Premier Cru Rosé de Saignée Brut.

The first dish consisted of four elements—a skin-on fillet of sandre (European pike-perch, a freshwater fish that can be

found in the rivers of Champagne), sautéed foie gras, a puree of baby carrots, and a sauce of reduced Pinot Noir—that intermingled with one another in perfect harmony. The textures of the rich fish and molten foie gras, both of which had a seared golden brown surface, melded together, as did their sweet/savory caramelized flavors. The local spring carrots were boiled in a minimal amount of water (which, said Bernard, keeps all the flavor in the vegetable) along with fresh tarragon, which gave the carrots a subtle exotic edge. And the drizzle of concentrated Pinot Noir provided tart acidity to counter the richness.

Empreinte, with its artful combination of three grape varieties, solid structure, taut fruit, persistent acidity, and mineral finish, was an ideal accompaniment to this dish, creating a meeting of food and wine on an equal footing.

The second dish was not originally on the agenda but was inspired by our conversation about the importance of good ingredients. “You take something like the classic escargots à la Bourguignonne,” said Bernard. “Most people get snails out of a can, which are chewy and tasteless, then try to make up for the lack of flavor by covering them in greasy butter and lots of garlic. If, however, you use fresh snails, it can be sublime.”

To prove his point, he went to the kitchen and came back 10 minutes later with a hot ceramic platter of six semi-circular indentations, each of which contained a succulent little snail with just enough sweet/salty butter to cover it, lightly accented with fresh parsley and a touch of garlic, and topped by a tiny round crouton. “These escargots come from local fields, and you can taste the difference.”

Passing the plate around, we took turns scooping out the contents of each indentation with a little spoon, and these snails were indeed unlike any I had had before. The most important element here was the snail itself, which was small and succulent, with a delicate texture that was almost crunchy but tender at the same time and a subtle earthy flavor that was further enhanced rather than covered up by the butter and garlic. Nonetheless, this dish required an assertive wine, and the vintage 2004 extra-brut, with only two grams of sugar per liter, cut right through the buttery intensity, while its barrel-fermented Chardonnay fruit stood up to the rich flavors.

The last dish, an apparently simple dessert of fresh strawberries from the nearby town of Voivre with a granité of Pinot Noir, once again showed off the understated complexity and restraint of Bernard’s cooking. The perfectly ripe berries, lightly dusted with a fine powder of Madagascar black pepper, retained their natural flavor and perfume suggestive of *fraises des bois*, and the shaved ice of Pinot Noir brought out the fresh strawberry even more. (Bernard later told me that the mysteriously exotic aroma of the granité comes from infusing the sugar syrup with fresh basil, tarragon, and rosemary before adding the wine.) While Geoffroy’s rosé saigné certainly has the body to stand up to savory food, it was also perfect with this dessert: the rosehip tartness of the Pinot Noir balanced the sweetness of the ripe berries, and the black pepper echoed the spicy element of the wine, resulting in a perfectly refreshing combination with which to conclude our matching experiment.

All in all, this exploration of pairing grower-Champagnes and regional foods demonstrated that, while the combination of great wine and food has no boundaries (how about that rosé saignée with a juicy hamburger?), there remains a natural affinity between the wine and the food of a particular place, especially when the wines are made by small grower-producers, when the foods are seasonal and artisanal, and the dishes are prepared by someone who is sensitive to the intrinsic qualities of both.

As Aurélien Laherte said, when it comes to good taste, “The only limit is our imagination.”

Alan Tardi, a chef, writer, and wine/restaurant consultant, divides his time between Italy and the United States. His book *Romancing the Vine* won a 2006 James Beard Award.