

# WINE FIRST, BUBBLES SECOND

Champagne's overlooked Aube region enters a new era

BY ALAN TARDI

**W**hen wine drinkers shop for Champagne, the brand is generally more important than the place. While a Burgundy lover might look for Montrachet or Meursault, Champagne buyers are loyal to Dom Pérignon or Veuve Clicquot.

But the Champagne region comprises sub-zones that are as different as Burgundy's Côte d'Or and Chablis. Best-known are the Montagne de Reims, where Pinot Noir predominates,



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BEATRIZ DA COSTA

The Aube region, located in the southeast of Champagne, draws winemaking inspiration from neighboring Burgundy.

and, across the Marne River, the Côte des Blancs, where Chardonnay rules. The Marne Valley, farther downstream, grows mainly Pinot Meunier—less prestigious, but still essential to the blend of most Champagnes.

And then there's the Aube, Champagne's forgotten stepchild.

Located in the extreme southeast of the region, and separated from its more prestigious cousins by an extensive vine-free zone, it has long been an anonymous supplier of rustic, less-expensive wines for the big Champagne brands. But finally, the Aube is emerging in its own right as a source of distinctive, well-crafted wines.

"I used to be ashamed to be Auboisi," says Michel Drappier, whose winery, which produces 1.5 million bottles per year, is one of the largest and oldest in the area. "Now I'm proud of it."

A new day has dawned in the Aube, shedding light on an overlooked, undervalued wine-producing area that, with its unique microclimate and abundance of dynamic young winemakers, shows a different side of Champagne.

"There are three things which distinguish this area from the northern part of Champagne," says Aurélien Gerbais, of the Pierre Gerbais winery in Celles-sur-Ource: "The *terroir*, the history and the people. Once you understand these things, you understand what makes the Aube special."

**H**istory has left the Aube feeling exploited by the great Champagne houses.

The region has a long history of grapegrowing—before phylloxera there were more than 54,000 acres of vines in the Aube. But when the official boundaries of the Champagne production zone were first drawn up, in 1911, the Aube was excluded altogether. After what became known as the Revolt of 1911, the authorities agreed to include the Aube in the Champagne area, but only as a *deuxième zone*, with second-tier prices to match.

In 1927, the Aube was officially admitted as a "full and equal partner" of the Champagne Viticole. There are presently about 19,000 acres of Aube vineyards in the 84,000-acre Champagne area. But in reality, the southern sector has long functioned merely as a source of grapes to round out the blends of the Marne's big bottlers. With no *grands-* or *premiers crus* and no world-famous *Grandes Marques*, the Aube remained in obscurity.

But geography—the *terroir* of the Aube—gave the region a unique advantage: a kinship with Burgundy.

The grapegrowing area of the Aube runs primarily along a hilly strip called the Côte des Bar. Unlike the Marne, which is characterized by extensive Cretaceous deposits of chalk, the Côte des Bar's older Kimmeridgian soil, formed during the Jurassic period, consists mostly of limestone and clay. It's the same geologic configuration that shaped the Chablis region of Burgundy, just across the Aube's border to the south.



Michel Drappier and his father, André, carry on a family winemaking legacy that extends back to the early 1800s. Educated at the enology school in Beaune, Michel has emphasized the role of *terroir* in his cuvées.

This proximity to Burgundy has had a major impact on Aube winemakers, one they are now leveraging to distinguish their wines from the Champenois of the Marne.

Michel Drappier, Aurélien Gerbais and many other young Aube winemakers went to enology school in Beaune rather than Reims. While Champagne vintners craft their still wines in ways that make them better sparklers, the Auboisi have learned to take the opposite tack, putting the wine before the bubbles. It's a trend in evidence throughout the region, especially with the rise in grower Champagne. But the Aube is especially well-suited to this approach.

Drappier says, "Because of our soil and more southern climate, our wine is naturally fuller-bodied and more vinous than the wines of the Marne. When I first started working at our winery, my father taught me how to take the *terroir* out, which is what everyone who made wine here tried to do then. But you can't hide who you are. And now we don't have to: We were saved by people who want

wine first, bubbly wine second.”

Gerbaïs, who is the fourth generation to work in his family’s winery, emphasizes the quality of the still wine he uses for Champagne. “You can add bubbles if you like,” he says, “but first it must be a wine.”

Eighty years ago, his great-grandfather planted what is now the oldest plot of Pinot Blanc (known locally as Vrai Blanc) in the Aube. “He was convinced our *terroir* was well-suited for white grapes, even though the *négociants* wanted everyone to plant Pinot Noir because that’s what the Marne needed.”

Now Pinot Blanc has become a standard-bearer for the Aube. Gerbaïs’ Extra Brut Champagne L’Originale NV, made from 100 percent Pinot Blanc, shows why, balancing delicate floral aromas with a full-bodied palate of ripe exotic fruit and a crisp edge of acidity.

“I really don’t like bubbles very much,” says Cédric Bouchard, the amiable renegade behind Champagne Roses de Jeanne.

Bouchard also went to school in Beaune, but says he learned absolutely nothing there and couldn’t wait to get away. Ironically, when he got to Paris, the only job he could find was in a wineshop.

“I tasted wines unlike anything I had tasted before, wines that showed the character and personality of place. ‘Wow,’ I said to myself, ‘we have a very special *terroir* in the Aube; why can’t we make wines like this?’ The next time I went home, I told my father I wanted to make wine. He said, ‘Oh really? Take this.’ He gave me his most undesirable parcel, with poor soil and exposition, and I did the exact opposite of everything he did.”

Bouchard’s approach, atypical for Champagne, relies on one plot, one vintage and one grape variety per wine: Pinot Noir for Les Ursules, Pinot Blanc for La Bolorée and Chardonnay for La Haute Lemblé. He uses no chemicals in the vineyards, no chaptalization of the must, and no *dosage* in the wines. “I treat all my vines the same; the soil changes everything. My biggest challenge is to pick at just the right moment to get the perfect balance in the grapes, then I let the wine take care of itself.”

**B**ouchard is one of many winemakers in the Aube who have embraced sustainable, even biodynamic, viticulture and less intervention in the vinification. While these techniques are difficult and risky in Champagne’s cool and wet northerly climate, the



Cédric Bouchard aims to channel the unique character of the Aube with single-plot, varietal bottlings made from Pinot Noir, Pinot Blanc or Chardonnay.

Aube’s more southerly location gives it an advantage.

Among the biodynamic advocates are Bertrand Gautherot of Vouette & Sorbée, Dominique Moreau of Marie-Courtin (Moreau works out of her husband’s winery, Piillot Père & Fils, which is in the process of converting), and newcomers Bénédicte and Emmanuel Leroy of Ruppert-Leroy, who began making wine on their tiny estate in Essoyes in 2010. All three make compelling wines that express their respective *terroirs* in a direct, stripped-down way, with minimal intervention.

This widespread tendency toward natural and biodynamic winemaking in the Aube can be largely attributed to Jean-Pierre Fleury, who pioneered biodynamic winemaking in Champagne, farming organically since 1970 and biodynamically since 1989.

Fleury, whose father was one of the first in the Aube to produce his own Champagne, in 1929, has now passed management of the winery to his sons Jean-Sébastien and Benoît, and daughter Morgane, who helps promote the family business from her Paris wine-shop, Ma Cave Fleury. The future is looking bright: Fleury’s Extra Brut Boleró 2004, made from 100 percent Pinot Noir (one-third of it vinified in *barrique*) and matured for eight years *sur latte*, is a full-bodied yet elegant Champagne that demonstrates the exceptional potential of both the Côte des Bar and biodynamic winemaking in general. It scored 93 points on *Wine Spectator*’s 100-point scale.

Les Riceys is the largest commune in the Champagne appellation and has long been an important source of grapes. But what

## ALISON NAPJUS’ PICKS FROM THE AUBE

SCORE	WINE	PRICE
96	FLEURY PÈRE & FILS Extra Brut Champagne 1995	\$140
93	CÉDRIC BOUCHARD Brut Blanc de Noirs Champagne Inflorescence La Parcelle NV	\$110
93	DRAPPIER Brut Champagne Grande Sendrée 2006	\$120
92	PIERRE GERBAIS Brut Champagne Cuvée de Réserve NV	\$89/1.5L
92	MOUTARD PÈRE & FILS Brut Champagne Prestige NV	\$45
91	JACQUES LASSAIGNE Extra Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne Les Vignes de Montgueux NV	\$57
91	VOUETTE & SORBÉE Extra Brut Champagne Fidèle NV	\$95
90	CHASSENAY D’ARCE Brut Champagne Cuvée Première NV	\$55
90	MARIE-COURTIN Extra Brut Pinot Noir Champagne Efflorescence 2009	\$75
90	THIERRY MASSIN Brut Champagne Réserve NV	\$56

really distinguishes this town—and spotlights the distinctive *terroir* and bright potential of the Aube—is its Pinot Noir-based still rosé.

The commune is located at the southern end of the Côte des Bar, near the Burgundy border. While the soil here is basically the same as in the rest of the Côte des Bar, the landscape is markedly different.

“If you go up into the hills above the village you will see many small, horseshoe-shaped valleys called *cuvettes*,” says Pascal Morel, of Morel Père & Fils, one of the village’s oldest wineries. “At the bottom are fields and at the top are trees, with the vineyards in the middle, like in an amphitheater. Only the best and the steepest slopes are used for rosé. And it is only made in exceptional years.”

Rosé des Riceys is not your typical fruity young rosé, resembling instead a light, transparent red Burgundy with a hint of tannins, a pronounced mineral edge and a propensity for aging. Following a tour of the cellar containing a collection of Rosé des Riceys going back to the 1950s, Morel offered a taste of his 1990. The wine was still incredibly fresh and lively, with only a light onion-skin hue to betray its age.

“The special combination of soil, *cuvettes* and vinification process gives the rosé of Riceys its unique ability to evolve favorably over time,” notes Morel.

“We use the process of carbonic maceration,” explains Olivier Horiot, who began experimenting with making his own rosé in 2000, when he was still a member of the local cooperative. “Whole clusters are put in a closed vat, carbon dioxide forms inside, and the fermentation takes place within each individual grape. Once the juice begins to emerge we let it macerate for three to five days. The condition of the grapes must be perfect and the timing is critical: If you rack it off too soon, you won’t have enough color or tannin; too late and you lose the freshness. We monitor the wine constantly during fermentation and remove it at just the right moment, even if it’s the middle of the night. It’s like having a baby!”

Just 865 of the over 2,100 acres of vineyards in Les Riceys qualify for rosé, and just 10 percent of that is actually used, says Morel. Due to the inherent difficulties of production and the wine’s niche market, only about a dozen producers make Rosé des Riceys, and not all of them make it every year.

**G**iven the success of these new independent producers, it is likely that more will join their ranks. But it is also probable that the vast majority of Aube growers will continue to sell their grapes to the large houses of the Marne through *négociants* or cooperatives, as they always have, and that the Marne will, in turn, continue to rely on a significant amount of grapes from the Aube.

In fact, many of the big names are solidifying their foothold in the region. Veuve Clicquot has a facility in Bar sur Seine to store reserve wines. Taittinger, which first began acquiring vineyards in the Aube in the 1950s, has both a press and cellar. And Moët & Chandon is constructing a new 600,000-liter capacity press in Bar



Aube pioneer Jean-Pierre Fleury with sons Benoît (left) and Jean-Sébastien. The family estate, long-established in the Côte des Bar, has farmed biodynamically since 1989, yielding benchmark bubbles from organic grapes.

sur Aube which will be operational in time for the 2015 harvest.

Where there was once hostility and resentment, there is now a certain synergy, even mutual respect, between north and south. “We owe a debt of gratitude to the Marne,” says Bertrand Gautherot. “The fact that I can be here making my own wine today is due in large part to the good job the big brands did of promoting Champagne throughout the world.”

There is, it seems, enough room in the Aube for everyone. And the region continues to expand: In 2008, the INAO—the organization in charge of regulating and administering wine appellations throughout France—began the lengthy and complicated process of revising the equally complex boundaries of the Champagne AOC. Six years later, the process is still ongoing; no one knows when it will be finished and, anticipating the major repercussions their decisions will have, the INAO is not saying anything until their determination is complete.

However, it is likely that additional acreage in the Aube will be granted AOC Champagne status, opening the door for more growers and producers to express the unique character of this undervalued region. At least one thing is certain: Now that the Aube has emerged from the shadows, it will not fade back into obscurity.

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