



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

When it comes to great food and wine pairings there is nothing better than serving the classic wines with traditional holiday meals. This quarter the selections cover the great regions of France, with selections from the Loire Valley (Sancerre), Burgundy (Chablis), and of course Champagne.

Tribaut-Schloesser Champagne Blanc de Chardonnay Extra Brut - \$69

Although producers in Bordeaux and Burgundy may take issue with this statement, I do not believe there is a wine region of France that is more iconic than Champagne. It is a wine that is universally accepted as the drink to celebrate special events by wine lovers and neophytes alike. Yet, what is most often lost to consumers is that Champagne can be real, terroir driven wine that is every bit as complex and place specific as any region of France. This selection will show you where the modern Champagne houses are moving and why it is time to start considering the wines serious options for your wine evolution.

I believe the main reason that wines from Champagne are not held in the same esteem as other terroir driven examples is the nature of the industry since the end of WWI. At that time the vineyards of the region were decimated, as the trench warfare occurred in the middle of the Champagne region, and the producers were on the verge of financial ruin. Most of the houses sold off their last remaining asset, their vineyards, in small pieces to thousands of farmers who were then responsible for farming their holdings. This was done with the agreement that the houses would then buy the grapes at harvest. There are many reasons why this short term cure caused long term problems and one of them was that now the Champagne houses were free to buy grapes from all over the region, not just primarily use of their own fruit. The positive attribute of this is that the houses discovered they could blend grapes from the various sub-zones of the Champagne region to craft a consistent quality product year after year. To me the unintended consequence is that this homogenized the wines as individual "house style" became more important than actual terroir. Now a century later we a young generation of winemakers are striving to bring the conversation back to wines that speak to their place, not just style.

Space does not allow for a deep dive into all the amazing elements that make the Champagne region unique so here are the bullet points. The Champagne region is located at the highest latitude of any wine region in France. This means the vines receive a couple of hours more sunlight per day than even Bordeaux producers, but at much cooler temperatures. As a result the grapes ripen slowly and never accumulate a lot of sugar but retain great acidity. It is this balance of low alcohol and freshness that makes Champagne so refreshing and lively. The Champagne region is also dominated by limestone, the perfect medium for giving the wines their unique sense of minerality. Specifically the area is primarily Kimmeridgian soil, which is a limestone rich clay that is also found in Chablis and Sancerre. Finally, the process of making Champagne, using a secondary fermentation in the bottle, creates extra dimension and complexity in the finished product. All of these factors combine to make Champagne the standard by which all other sparkling wines are judged.

For our first selection this wine comes from the Tribaut-Schloesser family, who began farming their land in 1929 and today are led by the 4th generation. Their holdings are primarily on the west side of the Montagne de Reims and the Vallée de la Marne, two of the primary zones of Champagne production. Because of their unique location they benefit from a slightly warmer climate than most of Champagne but also a real mix of soil types. This allows them to have a vast pallet of options when creating the blends for their Champagnes. The most current generation has began targeting their primary holdings in the Brunet Valley, which lies just west of Hautvillers, where the monk Dom Perignon resided. Thanks to a unique combination of gravel over a thick layer of chalk they are able to produce Champagnes that are very distinctive.

This bottling is a new addition to their line, a 100% Chardonnay that is exclusively from three villages. All of the grapes were farmed organically and 20% of the base wine was barrel fermented. Once the blend is made it was fermented in the bottle for 36 months before disgorgement and dosage is only 6 grams per liter. This is a very friendly style of Champagne with notes of Fuji apple, underripe pineapple, Meyer lemon preserves and of course a little chalk dust. The palate is an ample example with an initial richness that is quickly laser focused by minerality. I like the persistence of this glass

making it the perfect complement to stone crab claws or cheese soufflé. Also, this wine was just selected to be the premium by-the-glass selection at all Daniel Boulud restaurants.

2022 Pierre Quénard Chablis Premier Cru Vaillons - \$49

The region of Chablis lies two hours south of Champagne and is the most northern of the Burgundy sub zones. The soils are similar to those of Champagne, a limestone rich clay called Kimmeridgian soil. It was formed over 150 million years ago when what is now Europe was covered by a vast sea, and is the result of the decay and fossilizing of calcium rich animals like oysters over this time. Today this soil sits at the surface but also goes meters deep, so the roots of the vines bring this character to the grapes, which is then imparted on the wine. In Chablis the only grape variety allowed is Chardonnay, which produces a relatively neutral wine and is the perfect medium to express this character.

For our selection the wine is produced from a Premier Cru vineyard within the Chablis region named Vaillons. In Chablis the individual sites like this are called *climats*, of which there are 47 including the Grand Crus. Vaillons is one of the largest, a little more than 300 acres, with a gentle slope and south-east exposure. The reason that the Premier Cru and Grand Cru Climats are relevant is their slope and exposition. Sloped vineyards have thinner top soil which naturally reduces the plant's yield and creates greater intensity in the wine. The thinner top soil also means the roots of the vines do not have to go as deep to strike the Kimmeridgian clay, which further enhances minerality in the wine. Finally, the southern exposure means the vines receive more sunlight during the day which boosts the ripeness of the grapes and makes for fuller bodied wines.

Decant this wine for a half hour before serving as it shows a little fresh cut cabbage/matchstick notes of reduction. Those notes quickly blow off and then a complex bouquet of fresh lemon and kumquat, baked red apples, magnolia blossom and toasted panko breadcrumbs appears. The palate reveals a lot more texture and richness than the nose would lead you to believe, with a long finish encased in a veil of chalk dust and oyster shells. Drink 2024-2029 with Coquilles St. Jacques or veal meatballs in a brown mushroom sauce.

2022 Bernard Fleuriet Sancerre Côte de Marloup - \$49

At less than a two hour drive from Chablis to Sancerre, traveling southwest across grain fields and livestock ranches that remind you how agricultural the economy of France is even today. If you ever make the drive then make sure to look out for the escarpments and exposed hillsides and you will notice that they are grey/white, the telltale sign of limestone. Despite the crops at the surface what lies below is the same Kimmeridgian clay that is the foundation of Champagne and Chablis as well as our final feature from Sancerre. In fact, when you get to Sancerre the limestone is so close to the surface that the rows between the vines appear to be snow covered.

Despite the close proximity to Burgundy the thirteen communes that make up Sancerre are in the Cher department of the Loire Valley. Sauvignon Blanc has been the dominant variety since phylloxera struck the region in the early 1900's, but before that producers grew mostly Pinot Noir similar to Burgundy. The Sancerre appellation was one of the first established in France, in 1939, and at that time Sauvignon Blanc was declared the only variety to be used.

For our feature I selected an example from one of the most dynamic producers in the region, Bernard Fleuriet. Fleuriet began the domain in 1991 and has since been joined by his sons Benoit and Matthieu. They have grown the estate to be more than 100 acres and received organic certification in 2013 and Demeter (biodynamic) in 2021. The cellar is very unique for Sancerre in that they only use stainless steel tanks for blending. All fermentation and aging is done in a mix of barrels, foudres and casks as well as concrete and clay amphora, where most properties in the region use mostly stainless steel. They also limit the amount of sulfur used, adding only at bottling, and even produce a cuvée that is sulfur free. The Côte de Marloup is from their oldest block, planted in 1991, and fermented and aged only in clay amphora.

When you are ready to serve this wine be prepared as this is a much richer and complex example than most you will find. The nose hints to something bigger with notes of pink grapefruit, Fuji apple, candied kumquat and linden flowers. On the palate this wine is where this wine shows the extra gears, with a richly textured and round middle that still shows the mineral tinged edges of both Sauvignon Blanc and Kimmeridgian clay. Then it has exceptional length with layers that unfold over several glasses. Drink 2024-2027 with an asparagus and goat cheese tart, mussels or a roast chicken with fresh thyme and bay leaves under the skin.