

Week 1 - Champagne

Grape Variety

Only three are planted. 30% is Chardonnay (adds elegance and also acid...necessary for aging), 30% Pinot Noir (provides depth and structure) and 40% Pinot Meunier (meunier means miller, a reference to the downy, floury underside of the leaves). PM adds early maturing richness... it is also a high yielder and a late budder and is resistant to spring frost.

Geographical Boundaries

Champagne is the most northerly appellation. Unusual in that one appellation covers the whole region. The bulk of the region is about 145 km NE of Paris. Subregions here are the Montagne de Reims, the Vallee de la Marne, the Cote des Blancs and the Coteaux des Sezannais. The satellite region of the Aube is located about 130 km to the SE, almost in Burgundy.

Viticultural Methods

Total region under vine is about 30,000 Ha. Only about 10% of this is owned by the large houses. The rest is divided among close to 20,000 growers. Many of these own less than 1 Ha. Vineyards are rated by quality on a percentage scale from 80% to 100% and growers are paid based on their vineyard rating. Only grapes from the 17 "Grand Cru" communes are paid at 100%. Premier cru are paid at between 90 and 98% of the maximum. This unusual system (born in fierce riots a century ago) ensures that the growers share in the wealth the region generates...fully 25% of the export value of AC French wines is generated by champagne. Two communes were dropped recently, and replaced by 5 new ones.

Harvest and Yield Restrictions

Maximum yield is 65 hl/ha. Grapes are hand picked. This is usually seen as the better quality alternative to machine picking, as machines might break the red grapes skins and colour the juice. Most growers have no choice, as the vineyards are either too steep for mechanization, or the individual holdings are so small that machinery is uneconomical.

Minimum Alcoholic Content

This changes from year to year. Like any northern growing zone quality can be severely impacted by weather. The governing authority sets this based on the ripeness of the vintage.

Winemaking Techniques

This is where champagne departs from other regions. Grapes are pressed and clear juice is extracted and fermented in stainless steel (some premium houses use old wood for some fermentations). Pressing usually takes place near the vineyards, with juice transported by truck to the wine-making facilities. Current wines are blended with wines from the houses cellar to make a wine consistent with the house style. These are then bottled and a mix of yeast, sugar and old wine is added. The bottle is crown capped (note the beer bottle neck on champagne bottles) and the yeast consumes the sugar and releases CO₂. Pressure in the bottle increases to about 90 PSI. NV champagne must rest one year, vintage a minimum of three years. The bottles are now slowly inverted in a process called *remuage*. The expired yeast settles on the cap, the neck of the bottle is frozen, and the frozen wine and yeast are disgorged. The bottle is topped up with a mix of sugar and still wine. This *dosage* determines the wines sweetness. Most champagne is sold as Brut, or dry.