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Artisanal champagnes from small owner-growers are proving to be the hidden gems in a brand-led market, says John Stimpfig. Photograph by George Ong.

Compared to the great, historic champagne houses of Roederer, Taittinger, Krug and Veuve Clicquot, it is fair to say that names such as Moncuit, Vilmart, Giraud and Gimonet aren't nearly so instantly recognisable or even familiar. Indeed, I am willing to wager a magnum of Bollinger RD that most wine drinkers haven't even heard of these relatively rare and exceptional champagnes, let alone tasted them. What's more, I'm also willing to bet that those collectors who are extremely au fait with these so-called "growers' champagnes" are already cursing me for revealing one of the best-kept secrets in all of Reims and Epernay.

It's therefore a touch ironic that there are literally hundreds of these owner-growers throughout the appellation, all of whom choose to make and market their own champagne rather than selling their grapes to the Grandes Marques. Moreover, given how highly critics such as Michel Bettane, Jancis Robinson and Tom Stevenson regard some of these exciting, individual and occasionally quirky wines, one wonders why we haven't heard more about them.

One self-evident reason for this invisibility is the size of some of these Lilliputian producers. Take, for instance, someone such as Jérôme Prévost in Gueux, who produces around 6,000 bottles in any given year. This is barely a drop in the ocean of champagne, when you consider that some well-known brands are producing tens of millions of bottles per annum.

And therein lies the other reason for their relative obscurity: They are simply dwarfed and blotted out by the gargantuan Grandes Marques who dominate the champagne landscape. Last year, 400m bottles of champagne were produced and, in some export markets beyond Europe, 97 per cent was accounted for by the major houses. Of course, it is these massive volumes that

drive the Grandes Marques' marketing and promotion (and vice versa). As the *FT's* wine correspondent Jancis Robinson points out, "No segment of the wine business is anything like as heavily branded as champagne."

Except, of course, when it comes to the minnow-like owner-growers who have neither the time, turnover nor inclination for this kind of commercial self-aggrandisement. And, even if they did, it would be a waste of money. "Some of the best *récoltants-manipulants* [own-label growers] have so little wine to sell in the first place that it's more a question of cherry-picking whom they sell to," says Andrew Nicholls, director of specialist importer Vine Trail.

Consequently, some of these hidden gems can be snapped up very quickly by those in the know. "As soon as we list a vintage of Selosse on the website, it goes in the blink of an eye – even at £120 a bottle," says Tom Mann, associate director at Bordeaux Index. "And, after that, they are gone for good because it is very difficult to establish a secondary market for them. If you want someone like Selosse's wines, you can't afford to hang around." Clearly, there are big advantages to being so small.

Indeed, their lack of brand profile is often a badge of honour to sophisticated aficionados, who will, quite rightly, also continue to buy and enjoy their Krug, Cristal and Comtes de Champagne. But, by their very nature, serious collectors cast the net widely. They love to wander off the beaten track into more difficult terrain where there are greater risks, but also greater rewards. Pouring Dom Pérignon at a party undoubtedly says something about you; but serving a 1996 Pierre Moncuit over dinner says even more.

Others argue that some collectors have a different mind-set when it comes to these boutique champagnes, or what the New York importer and distributor

Right: Henri Giraud's Aÿ Grand Cru Fût de Chêne is made in tiny quantities of 10,000 to 30,000 bottles a year. In Tokyo, it can sell for twice the price of Cristal.



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Michael Skurnik affectionately calls “farmer fizz”. One of the reasons why he so heartily recommends these champagnes is that they come “from a farmer rather than a factory. So you should drink them because it is honest, real wine, grown and made by a vintner – by a ‘him’, not by an ‘it.’” Not surprisingly, this is something Pierre Larmandier, owner of Larmandier-Bernier in Vertus, endorses, adding, “We want champagne to be thought of as something closer to wine.”

Indeed, if you take out the bubbles, an authentic grower’s champagne is not that dissimilar to boutique, domaine-bottled burgundy, with the same sort of values, heritage and philosophy (not to mention grape varieties). It’s all about the scale of production.

“Because of our size, we have total control over what we grow and make,” says Didier Gimonnet, whose family have been growers in Cuis in the Côtes des Blancs since the 1750s. “And that means it’s easy to produce high-quality, hand-crafted champagne. For instance, our Prestige Cuvée champagne can represent 50 per cent of a vintage, which is rare in Champagne. But we can do it because we have vines in the best vineyards and, because we are growers, we can pick and vinify parcel by parcel. That kind of precision and attention to detail makes it very haute couture.”

Gimonnet’s Chardonnay-based champagnes are pure terroir wines with a bolt of bracing, rapier-like acidity and freshness to them. However, it’s no surprise that every good owner-grower is just as passionate about their particular patch of dirt. Whereas many underperforming non-vintages can be ubiquitous, anonymous blends, growers such as Egly-Ouriet in Ambonnay or Serge Mathieu in the Aube are the exact opposite – with personality and presence stamped all over them. Indeed, it’s precisely because these growers don’t need to try to please everybody that their terroir and often vintage-based wines invariably stand out from the crowd. As Pierre Larmandier says, “There are many different styles of champagne, and these differences should be seen as positive rather than negative.”

Nevertheless, the ongoing growers’ revolution, however niche and unthreatening, certainly couldn’t have happened without the big brands paving the way. Few would disagree that the big boys created the market conditions for all this to occur, which is why owner-growers are such a recent – and expanding phenomenon. “There are a lot more growers



(someone who sells grapes as well as bottling their own wine), Giraud’s vintage prestige Grand Cru Fût de Chêne is another artisanal triumph, which has gathered plaudits around the world since its first vintage in 1990. It continues to be made in the most minuscule quantities – 10,000 to 30,000 bottles per annum – and priced accordingly. “Now it’s selling for twice the price of Cristal in Tokyo,” says owner Claude Giraud.

Yet it’s equally the case that not every grower’s champagne is worth ferreting out or paying top dollar for. Indeed, many should be given a very wide berth. As Henry Lane Fox, founder of the London champagne bars Amuse Bouche, says, “The quality can go from the sublime to the ridiculous.” In some instances, the winemaking is execrable. In others, the terroir just isn’t there. Sometimes it’s

unheard-of champagne. As well as repeating the exercise next year, we’re also going to sell a special mixed-case offer in time for Christmas,” Adams adds.

Meanwhile, more and more white-linen restaurants have been getting in on the act, including The Greenhouse, The Tate and The Fat Duck, to name but a few. Certainly sommeliers, such as Xavier Rousset, master sommelier of Texture, love them for their quality, variety and value. In all, Texture has 15 growers on its list including Legras, Prévost, E Barnault, Larmandier-Bernier, De Sousa and Jacquesson and Egly-Ouriet. “And all of them are selling very well,” says Rousset.

Equally, merchants have also been quick off the mark to supply these champagnes to their more educated and adventurous customers. And so they should – not least because it allows them to steal a march on the supermarkets. “The growers are generally too small for the grocers. But a tiny, really talented producer such as Henri Chauvet is just right for us to hand-sell,” says Private Cellar’s Amanda Skinner. Consequently, most good merchants in the US and the UK now stock at least one grower’s champagne. Some, such as Lea & Sandeman, Berry Bros & Rudd and the Vine Trail, stock several, as does Michael Skurnik in New York.

However, there’s another reason why off- and on-trade sales of growers’ champagnes are starting to sparkle in these pre-Christmas, credit-crunched times. And that is their price/quality ratio. With less investment in expensive marketing and an altogether less cynical approach to pricing, many of them undoubtedly deliver more bang for your buck – including at the prestige cuvée end.

Further down the ladder, the same principle probably applies even more. As a result, it’s not uncommon to find a superior grower’s vintage selling for less than a lacklustre NV brand. As Jancis Robinson points out, “Many of the big houses have raised prices recently, and there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that the best value in champagne is to be found *chez* the best individual growers, rather than the most familiar names.” In champagne, not only can small be beautiful, less can also be more. ♦

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in the past 10 years,” says Laurent Champs, winemaker at Vilmart et Cie, based in the picture-postcard village of Rilly La Montagne, just south of Reims. “You can’t help but notice that the quality has also improved a great deal in that time. But we have to acknowledge what the Grandes Marques have done. We wouldn’t be here without them.”

Now, of course, Vilmart is rightly regarded as one of the superstar growers in the region, partly because of its exceptional terroir, vintage expression and venerable old vines. But investment and winemaking expertise inevitably play key parts, too. And certainly, the bold introduction of oak vats and barrels to the cellar in the late 1980s did much to enhance and accelerate its stellar reputation. According to the champagne author and expert Tom Stevenson, the oak helped bring about a sea change in quality, which prompted him to rate Vilmart “the poor man’s Krug”. He has also called it nothing less than “the greatest grower-champagne I know”.

Yet Vilmart is by no means the only grower who is working with wood and acquiring cult status. The aforementioned Anselme Selosse, owner of the eponymous champagne house, has also become one of this niche sector’s leading lights. “There’s no question that Selosse’s champagnes are truly spectacular – especially his vintage fizz which has an astonishing depth of fruit, flavour and richness,” says Tom Mann. “They’re not apéritif wines at all. You really need to drink them at the table with food.”

Some would say the same of the awesome champagnes of Henri Giraud in Ay. Although technically a *négociant-manipulant*

both.” Lane Fox and his colleague, wine buyer Charles Adams, should know about the highs and lows of growers’ champagnes. The pair spent a year tasting hundreds of the good, the bad and the ugly before selecting 30 of the best to appear on their lists last July. “Beginning on Bastille Day, we suspended all sales of our usual Grandes Marques and only featured growers’ champagnes and a few other smaller producers,” he says.

Nonetheless, Amuse Bouche had no difficulty in putting together a mouthwatering range reflecting a broad palette of styles. “We could have listed dozens of them that hit our price/quality criteria,” says Lane Fox. In the end, Amuse Bouche settled on 10 under £35, 15 from £40 to £70, and about 10 in the rarefied prestige cuvée sector from £100 to £220, including Jacques Selosse’s Blanc de Blancs Substance at £220, and Giraud’s Fût de Chêne at £180.

So how did it go? “We were a bit nervous at first, but after a couple of days, our customers settled into it with remarkable gusto and, literally, everything sold. So it was very encouraging to see that people were incredibly willing to experiment and go beyond their comfort zone,” says Adams. “In fact, some were so popular that we have retained the six top sellers on our regular list.

“I think that customers were genuinely surprised, not just by the quality, but also by the variety of tastes and styles. But I think what also appealed to some people was the opportunity to have a genuinely rare and unique champagne that they hadn’t heard of before. And I imagine a few probably did brag to their friends that they’d discovered an amazing,

Top: Pierre Larmandier, owner of Larmandier-Bernier in Vertus, Champagne-Ardenne, is passionate about his patch of soil and small-scale production.

BUCKING THE FIZZ TREND

Amuse Bouche Champagne Bars, 020-7371 8517; www.abcb.co.uk. **Berry Bros & Rudd**, 0870-900 4300; www.bbr.com. **Bordeaux Index**, 020-7269 0700; www.bordeauxindex.com. **The Fat Duck**, High Street, Bray, Berkshire SL6 2AQ (01628-580 333). **The Greenhouse**, 27a Hay’s Mews, London W1 (020-7499 3331). **Lea & Sandeman**, 020-7244 0522; www.londonfinewine.co.uk. **Michael Skurnik**, +1516-677 9300; www.skurnikwines.com. **Private Cellar**, 01353-721 999; www.privatecellar.co.uk. **Tate Restaurant**, Millbank, London SW1 (020-7887 8877). **Texture**, 34 Portman Street, London W1 (020-7224 0028). **Vine Trail**, 0117-921 1770; www.vinetrail.co.uk.