



CLUB MAGNUM

VINS ET EXPÉRIENCES

BRUNO PAILLARD

CHAMPAGNE



IN A REGION NUMBERING OVER 30,000 HECTARES OF VINEYARDS AND 320 CRUS, MORE THAN 15,000 GROWERS, AROUND 250 HOUSES AND NOT FORGETTING OVER 100 COOPERATIVES, THERE IS PLENTY OF SCOPE FOR VARIATION AND COMPLEXITY.

Yet to the majority of the world outside of Champagne, the apparent dominance of a handful of brands gives almost the opposite impression. The Paillard family, who trace their existence as brokers and growers in the villages of Bouzy and Verzenay back to 1704, are as well-placed as any to interpret this paradox. Despite all of their dedication and pride in their work, they would have been almost completely invisible to anyone bar their neighbours and clients over the past three centuries.

One can understand, therefore, that someone within the family might one day want to put their head above the parapet. Bruno Paillard, who was born in 1953, spent the first six years of his career following the family tradition as a broker. However, his desire to create a specific style of Champagne was something that he was unable to ignore and in 1981, without a single vine to his name, and with only the funds from selling his beloved Jaguar XJS, he set about creating the first new Champagne house since Salon in 1921 and Selosse in 1960.

BRUNO PAILLARD



One immediately asks 'how?'. Taking on the might of Moët or aiming to swipe Krug's crown from its head does seem more the stuff of fanciful dreams rather than practical, clear-headed business. However, vision, drive, talent and personality can carry you far and Bruno has these qualities in spades. What this David required was something to put in his slingshot and this is where his background as a broker was invaluable. Knowing who were the best growers, which were the best plots and working with them on multi-year contracts allowed him to build up a supply base unrivalled in quality. The story is very reminiscent of that of another Bruno- the late, great Bruno Giacosa in Piemonte, similarly a gifted and well-connected broker who established his own estate by knowing where to source the good stuff.

Bruno's taste for Champagne of intense purity, that showed the chalky, mineral-laden soils of the region but that carried the finest, softest bubbles in order to deliver his desire for smooth and creamy textures meant that he had no option but to be exacting in his choices. From the beginning, he favoured the chalkiest terroirs, used only the first pressing and always required his wines to have extended ageing.

By 1985, his 'perpetual reserve', akin to a solera in a Sherry bodega, was being established, enabling the creation of a house style for his flagship Première Cuvée, which always carries around 30% of reserve wines and is blended from 35 different crus.

Other stylistic choices are the inclusion of barrel-fermented wines (around 25% in the Première Cuvée) and a preference for low dosage, typically 5-6 g/l when up to 15 g/l are permitted under the designation of 'Brut'. It is truly a 'multi-vintage' blend and includes all three grapes, with Pinot Noir dominant at 45%.

The business developed quickly, with production and sales growing in step. He was able to build new facilities on the edge of Reims specifically designed to match his requirements and techniques. However, he soon arrived at the point of needing to buy his own vineyards in order to further secure his fruit sources. A number of the growers with whom he had long worked were happy to trust him with the ongoing stewardship of their vineyards. Today, he has acquired 25 hectares across the region, enough to provide the house with 50% of its fruit requirements. No pesticides or herbicides are used and the team work hard to improve the micro-biological life of the soils, using composts and herbal preparations and avoiding synthetic products wherever possible. In 2007, Bruno's daughter Alice joined the team full-time and has paid particular attention to the vineyards, ever moving towards sustainability and improving the variety of vegetal material in the parcels, creating competition.





The range of wines has evolved significantly over the past four decades. The Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru is produced using 80% of its fruit from Le Mesnil, the balance from Cramant, Avize, Chouilly and Oger. With a dosage of just 5 g/l, four years 'sur lie' and a further 10 months in the cellar following disgorgement, the wine is fresh, direct, zesty and bracingly pure in style with a gorgeous array of aromas from citrus through to fruit blossoms and a touch of almond and toastiness on the palate.

The Rosé Première Cuvée is dominated by Pinot Noir, both as a white wine in the conventional way for Champagne production and as a red wine from prolonged skin contact. A dash of Chardonnay is also added to provide additional freshness. Once again, reserve wines going back over 25 vintages are used and the wine sees at least three years on the lees in addition to a few months cellaring post-disgorgement. It is a beautiful pale pink in colour, with notes of wild strawberry in evidence alongside the summer flowers.

Two further variations on Première Cuvée give additional insight into Bruno's philosophy. The 'Cuvée 72' is a late release version, perfect for those who like additional richness and toastiness in their Champagne without heaviness. It sees 36 months on the lees followed by a further 36 months in the cellar.

'Dosage Zéro' is inspired by Bruno's quest for purity and energy in his wines. Here the reserve wines account for half of the blend and Bruno favours the wines produced from the northern slopes of the Montagne de Reims and the upper section of the Marne Valley. Indeed it is the Pinot Meunier that takes the prominent role in the blend here and once again, up to four years on the lees are followed by six months ageing after disgorgement- and of course without any liqueur de dosage at bottling.

Vintage expressions often cause philosophic jitters for Champagne purists. How can a house that celebrates the complexity and craft of multi-vineyard and multi-vintage blending also make single vintage expressions? With the 'Assemblage de Millésime', only produced in the best vintages, complexity is achieved from additional lees ageing, normally seven to eight years and a focus on ten of the very best terroirs of Champagne. The precise blend itself can and does change from one vintage to the next but is generally 40% Chardonnay with the balance either purely Pinot Noir or with a little Meunier too. There is a further year in the cellar after disgorgement and only 5 g/l of dosage.

The Assemblage de Millésime is also occasionally made in a Blanc de Blancs expression, which usually sees eight to nine years on the lees and is even more limited in production.



IN 1990, BRUNO DECIDED TO SET HIMSELF ANOTHER GOAL: WHAT WOULD BE NEEDED IN ORDER TO MAKE THE ‘ULTIMATE’ CHAMPAGNE? THIS PROJECT WAS GIVEN THE NAME ‘NEC PLUS ULTRA’ – MEANING THE HIGHEST POINT CAPABLE OF BEING ATTAINED. PUSHING HIMSELF AND HIS TEAM TO THE LIMITS, THE FIRST WINE (FROM THE 1990 VINTAGE) FINALLY APPEARED IN 2002 WITH N.P.U., AS IT HAS BECOME KNOWN, ALSO APPEARING IN THE VINTAGES 1995, 1996, 2002, 2003, 2004 AND 2008.

Chief among the decisions were to restrict themselves only to vintages of exceptional character; to only use Grand Cru fruit (meaning of course only Pinot Noir and Chardonnay); to only use wines fermented in small wooden barrels; to then make a severe barrel selection; to leave the wine on the lees between ten and twelve years following bottling to really push the autolytic character; to give the wine a further year in the cellar following disgorgement and, once again, to minimise the dosage, this time to around 3 g/l. The resulting wine is a monument: to the commitment of Bruno and his team to leave no stone unturned in the search for perfection. It is not a wine for casual acquaintance and particular care is advised in opening and serving. This is very much a wine to marvel in at the table.

Champagne as a wine for celebration has global recognition but there are many more dimensions too. Madame Bollinger’s famous quote of drinking it when she was happy, or when she was sad, sometimes alone but considered as obligatory when she was in company, has resonated precisely because of the unique versatility of Champagne. If anything, Bruno Paillard has gone one step further, creating a rich array of expressions and pushing the boundaries wherever possible but always within the context of his singular stylistic vision. His wines, like the man himself, are well worth getting to know.

