

keeping it in the family

With their quirky production techniques, unusual blends and focus on terroir, small grower champagnes are increasingly attractive to the UK's restaurants. **Giles Fallowfield** heads over the Montagne de Reims in search of the little folk

Some 199 different growers sent their champagnes to the UK for sale in 2008. A certain proportion of this wine was basic-level fizz, sold almost anonymously on the shelves of the largest supermarkets with price as its only USP. But there is a growing interest in the band of high-quality growers who make small volumes of characterful and individual wine that reflects the particular terroir – often one specific cru – on which it is produced.

These small growers don't challenge the power of the major houses who have built the modern market for champagne. Between them, the three largest brands in the UK account for nearly one-third of the 36 million bottles sold here, while growers ship fewer than 800,000 bottles a year into Britain.

SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

However, in the higher echelons of the restaurant business, sommeliers are looking to small grower champagnes, in part because of their divergence of styles. They may not be as easy to sell as the well-known international brands, but they often represent very good value for money – an important consideration in the current market.

Growers such as Larmandier-Bernier, Pierre Gimonnet, Vilmar et Cie, Serge Mathieu, Chartogne-Taillet, René Geoffroy, Michel Arnould, Arnaud Margaine, Roger Brun, Franck Bonville, Claude Cazals, André Jacquart, Paul Déthune, Henri Giraud and Egly-Ouriet have sold their wines in the UK for many years and have an established niche following. Many of these family producers

There is a growing interest in champagne that reflects its terroir

are now run by the next generation, some of whom are changing the way they make their wines. A number of them are re-introducing or extending the use of oak for fermentation and ageing, perhaps in part influenced by Anselme Selosse. Jérôme Prévost, who is based in the village of Gueux and worked extensively with Selosse in his early days, has become something of a cult figure in his own right among the new generation of winemakers. Allocations of his tiny production of oak-fermented pure Pinot

Meunier champagne are much sought after at UK importers Vine Trail. Some growers, such as Nicolas Maillart in Ecueil, and Marie and Benoit Doyard at André Jacquart based in Vertus, have made radical changes to the style of wines the family produces. Nicolas Maillart, whose 8.5 hectares of vineyards are mainly in the premier crus of Ecueil and Villers-Allerand in the Montagne de Reims, plus a small parcel in the grand cru of Bouzy, completely changed everything, from the vineyards through to winemaking, from his first vintage of 2003.

NEW GENERATION

He now uses oak fermentation – experimenting with locally produced oak – has reduced dosage levels and also makes some extra brut styles. He has increased the reserve wine element in his blends and, unlike his father, with whom he never worked at the winery, he vinifies their small parcel of ungrafted Pinot Noir separately to make Extra Brut Premier Cru Franc de Pieds 2003.

This wine gets the works: it undergoes battonage and oak fermentation, malolactic fermentation is blocked, there is no filtration and virtually no dosage at just 2g/l. When I tasted it in June 2007, over a year before it was first released, while



ILLUSTRATION: GARY BULLOCK

clearly young, and with the oak still quite prominent, it was already surprisingly expressive. And the rich saignée, pure Pinot Noir rosé made from Bouzy fruit was, at that point, even more impressive.

Like Maillart, brother and sister Benoit and Marie Doyard have built a completely new winery at their base in Vertus, and their winemaker, Marie's husband Matthieu Duval, now produces just four champagnes using the best fruit from the family's premier and grand cru vineyards in Vertus and Le Mesnil. He has cut dosage levels to 3g/l and ferments all the wine in oak – the family has invested in 200 barriques between two and six years old produced by four different coopers. They have halved annual production, bringing it down to around 80,000 bottles in the search for quality, selling off the fruit from their 8 hectares of vineyards in Aisne and the Aube.

For growers like Jean-Baptiste Geoffroy, who still works with his father René, changing the style of the wines has

been a more gradual process. He is just completing the construction of a spacious new winery in Aÿ on a site that formerly belonged to the Cogevi co-op, just up the road from Bollinger, Deutz and Ayala.

There he finally has the room to fully realise plans that the smaller winery, by his vineyards in Cumières, didn't allow, and when I visited him in April he was very excited. 'The quality of the juice we

They have halved

annual production in the

search for quality

get here is much better, with three floors used and everything gravity fed,' says Geoffroy. 'We had wine in three different places in Cumières and only one press.'

Now he has two reconditioned traditional but automated Coquard presses installed side by side (which allows for gentler pressing) and increased storage

capacity, which makes it easier to vinify and keep different parcels separately.

We taste his 2008 blend of Empreinte, all vinified in oak barrels and this time a blend of 79% Pinot Noir, 6% Chardonnay and 15% Pinot Meunier, and you can see the quality of the harvest. He tells me about a new idea he has for five-way vineyard blend of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier, Petit Meslier and Arbanne all pressed together, vinified in stainless steel and aimed at giving a pure idea of the Cumières terroir. He has just created the initial reserve wine from the 2008 fruit and plans to bottle a blend of four harvests in 2011 with a 50% 2011 base.

GET FRESH

When we taste the range I find that, perhaps partly as a result of lower dosage levels (typically 6-7g/l), his wines are a little fresher and more austere in their youth. We finish with the 2000 vintage Volupté, a 70% Chardonnay and 30% Pinot Noir blend which is Extra Brut and only has 2g/l of sugar. Reticent at first it opens up in the large glass - Jean-

Baptiste recommends decanting this wine - revealing a full and rich palate, a chalky mineral note and a very long finish.

BACK TO NATURE

The Bérèche family has 9.3ha of vineyard in six different crus in the Petit Montagne de Reims in the premier crus of Ludes, Chigny-les-Roses and Trepail plus Ormes, Mareuil le Port and Festigny. They treat their vineyard with respect, with one hectare farmed biodynamically; this will increase to three hectares in Ludes if the weather is kind this year, according to Raphael Bérèche. Yields are generally kept low. In 2008, while the average in Champagne was up near 14,000kg/ha, their yields were around 9,000kg/ha, their production just 85,000 bottles.

Their winery is based in Craon de Ludes and they use natural yeasts for the initial ferments which partly take place in oak, about 15% in the case of the NV Brut and Extra Brut styles, both a three

The evident care

pays off in terms of

purity of flavours

way blend of 35% Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier with a little less Pinot Noir. No malolactic is allowed 'to preserve freshness and minerality' and the 30% reserve wine used in these two blends comes from the previous two harvests. Dosage in the Brut is 9g/l and in the Extra Brut it's just 2g/l.

The evident care taken by the Bérèche family both in the vineyard and in the natural winemaking employed pays off in terms of purity of flavours in the finished wines. And it seems this is very much the direction a whole new generation of small winemakers in Champagne are taking.

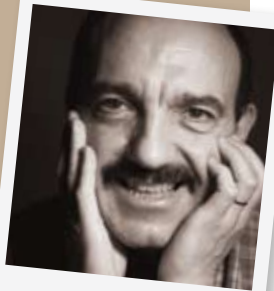
It's good news for an appellation where yields have been allowed to increase to meet growing demand, with quality issues taking a back seat. Perhaps the current downturn in demand for champagne in general will encourage lower yields more in tune with the quality that champagne needs to produce to stay ahead of sparkling wine production in other parts of the world. 🍷

Sommeliers with the small grower habit

GERARD BASSET MW, Hotel TerraVina

Basset lists seven growers' wines on a list of 18 champagnes, which changes regularly. All champagnes are listed together, with no descriptions.

'We don't need descriptions of the wines; people trust us, and my sommeliers tell our customers about them. Launois and Rémy Massin Rosé (£42.50) are the two champagnes we serve by the glass, the least expensive on the list and account for about 80% of sales, but otherwise growers' wines would make up about a third of our champagne business. Over the past five years growers' champagnes have become more accepted by the public.'



XAVIER ROUSSET, Texture

At Texture, nearly half the 40-odd producers in the large champagne section - 81 different cuvées - are grower wines.

'I definitely think grower wines deserve recognition for both the quality and value they offer, which is often better than the grandes marques. It is true they're harder to sell, but we do a lot when we have them by the glass. Many customers come here specifically to have this experience, not to try a grande marque. People are after a recommendation. Not all growers are good, but those that are deserve to be supported.'



LIONEL LAMADON, Hotel du Vin Cheltenham

Of the 44 champagnes listed, 11 come from growers. Prices range from £46 for Pierre Moncuit NV to £120 for Selosse.

'For me these are the real champagnes, not the grandes marques. You know exactly where the grapes come from, the dosage, the number of bottles made and the time of disgorgement, and you know who the winemaker is. However, champagne is the last wine category where people still go for brands, unfortunately. It's a struggle to sell Jérôme Prévost's wines, for example, as customers prefer a big name. A Pinot Meunier that spends 36 months in oak is outside most people's experience of champagne. Grower champagnes can work for regular customers who want something new, but I wouldn't take the risk with a customer I don't know.'



WILLIAM HUTCHINGS, The Bell at Skenfrith

Champagne takes up the first 25 pages of the considerable wine list. There are about 12 grower champagnes, including a saignée rosé from Paul Déthune.

'[We're expanding] because of the quality and value the best growers' champagnes offer. The [big] houses have put up prices considerably. We added the Déthune because I wanted to hold the price of our house rosé but keep the same quality for our customers.'

MATTHIEU LONGUERIE, La Trompette

The 14-strong NV selection contains just two wines that aren't made by growers. Indeed, 18 of the 27 champagnes listed are from growers.

'Customers are often a bit surprised that we don't have any champagne from the big houses, but we ask them what style they like and then I recommend something appropriate from our list. People are very happy to do this, but you must have a wide enough knowledge of champagne to be able to pull it off. Many of the houses are now really expensive, and by working with these growers we can keep more of the NV range around £60 and under £70 which is very good value for me.'



Where to buy growers' champagnes

VINE TRAIL 0117 921 1770,
www.vinetrail.co.uk

Boasts the widest list of high-quality grower-producers: Bérèche et Fils; Chartogne-Taillet; Larmandier-Bernier; Vouette et Sorbée, Bertrand Gautherot; Jérôme Prévost; Lilbert; Georges Laval; Jacques Lassaigue; Ulysse Collin; Cédric Bouchard; Benoit Lahaye; Gosset-Brabant

GENESIS WINES 020 7963 9062, www.genesiswines.com
Dehours; Maillart; Agrapart

H&H BANCROFT WINES 020 7232 5476,
www.bancroftwines.com
Pierre Moncuit; René Geoffroy

LIBERTY WINES 020 7720 5350,
www.libertywine.co.uk
Serge Mathieu; Roger Brun

TOP SELECTION 020 7499 4440,
www.topselection.co.uk
André Jacquart; Henri Giraud

CADMAN FINE WINES 0845 121 4011,
www.cadmanfinewines.co.uk
Franck Bonville

LEA & SANDEMAN 020 7244 0522,
www.leaandsandeman.co.uk
Egly-Ouriel; Barnault; Legras; Larmandier-Bernier

JOHN ARMIT, 020 7908 0600,
www.armit.co.uk
Pierre Gimonnet

GREAT GADDESSEN WINES 01442 412311,
www.flyingcorkscrew.co.uk
Arnaud Margaine

