



IT MAY NOT HAVE CROSSED MANY CHAMPAGNE LOVERS' MIND THAT BLANC DE BLANC IS MADE FROM A SINGLE VARIETAL. LIM HWEE PENG, CSW, A MEMBER OF COTEAUX DE CHAMPAGNE, SETS FORTH TO UNCOVER SOME INTERESTING NUGGETS ON SUCH CHAMPAGNE STYLE.

Though many will indulge in this royal drink during the festive season, champagne is, however, not an ordinary sparkling wine, nor just a sparkling wine category. We will spare readers with details on the elaborate and unique making process that led to the creation of fine and lasting bubbles in the bottle. Instead, we hope to trigger readers' curiosity by sharing the intricacy of a great but small treasure of the Champagne region – Blanc de Blanc. Of all the champagne types, this is one fine bubbly that stirs my wine mind; simply because it is rare (limited in production); the best of its pedigree, and an inimitable product in a traditional region with deep heritage.

Single Varietal Champagne

Understanding Blanc de Blanc

It is not farfetched to label Blanc de Blanc as a traditional bubbly that elicits a diverse reaction as compared to other champagnes. Although most debate on Blanc de Blanc are confined within the expression of wine style (rather than its quality), yet to some, such champagne is an unnecessary challenge to tradition. Since most, if not all champagne are made from the conventional method, i.e. through the fine art of blending, Blanc de Blanc champagne stood out (sometimes like a sore thumb) because it is made in the absolute opposite direction – craft entirely from a single grape varietal – Chardonnay. Though Chardonnay is hugely popular in the wine world, but in Champagne, it is the least planted varietal among the three approved noble grapes (incidentally, Pinot Meunier is the most widely planted varietal, accounting for 40 percent of acreage in Champagne). Therefore, despite the huge enthusiasm from Champagne winemakers



and Blanc de Blanc lovers, all this white champagne accounts only for less than five percent of total Champagne produced. Also, not any Chardonnay can be used to make this unique bubbly drink. Most premium Blanc de Blanc Champagne were crafted from fruit of Cote des Blanc origin, a sub-region that is considered as the best area for planting Chardonnay, as the varietal is able to offer the best site expression when it is used for the making of fine Blanc de Blanc. If all the above facts have not prompted you to view Blanc de Blanc differently, then I am confident the next information will – not every Champagne houses produce Blanc de Blanc champagne; and if they do, it is more often than not, the cream of the crop, or a luxury cuvee. The world's most expensive Blanc de Blanc Champagne, Krug Clos du Mesnil, is a classic example in illustrating the rarity and pedigree of such Champagne type.

Why Blanc de Blanc?

Certainly for those Champagne Houses who avoided making such fine champagne, there are many reasons for not doing so. Some would argue that Blanc de Blanc is not entirely a champagne, as it is not blended as it should be; or other purist will proclaim that Chardonnay can be good on its own, yet, it could only show its greatness when it is part of a complex blend in a champagne bottle. However, the truth for such reluctance may probably be due to a high demand and limited supply situation for the grape. Conventional champagne needs Chardonnay; Blanc de Blanc demands Chardonnay; and then there are non-vintage champagne brut made from common Chardonnay grapes harvested outside of the prime wine region. Despite such curious debate, all champagne lovers will generally agree that Chardonnay has more than its merit to stand on its own, especially when it originates from Cote des Blanc. Cote des Blanc not only has the highest acreage of Chardonnay planted, it is also the heart of finest Chardonnay grown in Champagne. Chardonnay thrives in Cote des Blanc because the region offers deep chalk soil with a climate that is conducive to the white grape (less prone to frost damage). Within Cote des Blanc, the vineyards located between Cramant and Mesnil-sur-Oger yield the best examples of the style, while Chardonnay outside the Cote des Blanc, usually only works well in blends. The huge demand for Chardonnay is also due to the elegance and finesse that the grape contributes to a traditional blend, and such beauty, which many Blanc de Blanc fans believed, is best epitomized in Blanc de Blanc champagne.

Wine Style of Blanc de Blanc

To Champagne connoisseurs, Blanc de Blanc Champagne is not the usual bubbly in a glass that pleases many palates with its light and fine bubbles. One unique trait of Blanc de Blanc is that it can be enjoyed in its vibrant youth, yet appreciably gaining complexity in its golden years. A young Blanc de Blancs exhibits green apple aromas or watermelon notes. Yet with age, it develops honey, floral characteristics, sometimes tropical fruit flavours enhanced by hazelnuts, brioche scent and smokey notes. Some Blanc de Blanc is also prized for exhibiting 'seriousness' in its expression. Krug Clos du Mesnil is both elegant and refined yet offers the all unique seriousness that is rare in a beverage that is commonly regarded as fun and celebratory drinks. Though some Champagne houses focus on promoting the depth, age and complexity of a Blanc de Blanc, some prefers the youthfulness, lightness and freshness of this single grape. Such as those from Champagne Mumm; its signature Blanc de Blanc – Mumm de Cramant, is a single-vintage wine made exclusively from Grand Cru Chardonnay of the premiere village of Cramant in Cote des Blanc. Other examples include Piper-Heidsieck Blanc de Blanc, which is somewhat lighter with an emphasis on freshness; while the Charles Heidsieck style emphasises on structure, complexity and depth.

Enjoying Blanc de Blanc

Though made from a single grape, most wine lovers find it pleasing to enjoy Blanc de Blanc as champagne, and at the same time, could also indulge it much similar to a fine Burgundy white wine. Many who preferred fine champagne, more often than not, perceived Chardonnay as an element to enhance the richness of Pinot Noir and

Pinot Meunier. Yet, a classy Blanc de Blanc demonstrates a likeness closer to a Bourgogne Blanc; with depth and richness reminding one of a fine Meursault. My personal preference is to enjoy it as a fine champagne to accompany dishes that were clean, pure and fresh. Otherwise, I will not hesitate to decant a fine Blanc de Blanc, and delight myself in deciphering the nuances of such finely crafted wine, albeit without the bubbles. In enjoying Blanc de Blanc Champagne, it seems that two factors stood out; despite its reputation as a light wine, a great Blanc de Blanc makes a stunning partner when paired with food. The best Blanc de Blanc, with the presence of high acidity, aged slower than a still wine.

Freshness

In Champagne, the most northerly of France's winegrowing regions, it has a long and cool growing season; thus, ensuring high acidity is preserved in each grape. In food and wine enjoyment, acidity plays a crucial role regardless of wine types. Thus, it is unsurprising that Blanc de Blanc champagne has a natural affinity as an excellent companion for most rich or pure-flavoured dishes, such as sashimi, sushi, Teochew steamed dishes, richly-flavoured Cantonese soup, spicy Thai fish cakes, as well as the richly spiced Peranakan dishes.



Age-worthiness

Most regard Blanc de Blanc Champagne as a fine bubbly that is endowed with long ageing potential than a typical Blanc de Noir. Fans of Krug Clos du Mesnil will agree that this rare bottle demonstrated not just graceful strength, but also longevity. Perhaps the treatment process could also have an impact on such cellaring potential French appellation d'origine controlee (AOC) law dictates that the minimum time spent on the lees (before disgorging) for champagne is 15 months (for non-vintage) and 36 months (for vintage-dated wines). Although it is also noted, in achieving complexity, many producers often exceeded such minimum requirement in the ageing of their champagne. Oddly, and gradually becoming a norm among the best producers, some wines were kept in the bottle much longer than the law requires (36 months for non-vintage, 60

months for vintage; while prestige cuvée were routinely aged even longer). A classic Blanc de Blancs may be restrained and refined in its youth; with ageing, it can develop into a complex and thought provoking bottle, destined for fine food and companionship.

Conclusion ...

This champagne style may continue to gain both credential and critique within and outside of the Champagne region; what is overwhelmingly factual is the 'rarity' factor – small production, produced only by limited Champagne houses in selected vintages. Regardless of the outcome of such debate, this seemingly controversial Champagne style continues to be appreciated by those who understood and support it. LHP