



IN REVIEW: 1995 Champagne 25 Years On Wine Dinner

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Champagne is quite special for its ability to age, its versatility with a range of foods and flavours and its ever-evolving styles. More specifically, we see producers devoting more time to understanding *terroir* and letting that character trait come through where previously the focus was always on blending. This 1995 Champagne Dinner offered the opportunity to taste and to experience with food the finest examples from this vintage from a range of producers with varying philosophies on winemaking and viticulture.

With the release of the 1996s, the 1995s seemed to get overshadowed. The year 1995 experienced a growing season with late flowering but once it occurred it happened fairly quickly. Then, the summer came on strong with a heatwave in June followed by nearly two months of no rain. Harvesting took place during mid to late September with a plentiful crop. It is considered the first vintage truly worthy of producing a vintage wine after 1990. The heat of the 1995 summer delivered Champagnes with ripe flavours and rounded textures, but they have acidity too, so for some critics they are more balanced in expression than the 1996s. For this dinner we paired the 1995s with the culinary creations of the chef and his team at Howard's Gourmet. The two favourites of the evening were the 1995 Jacques Selosse Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs and the 1995 Salon 'Le Mesnil' Blanc de Blancs. 1995 was a strong vintage for Chardonnay in Champagne and the standouts for the evening showcased that strength.



FIRST FLIGHT

Charles Heidsieck Blanc des Millénaires and Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs

1995 Charles Heidsieck 'Blanc des Millénaires' (based in Reims)

This Champagne was the brilliant creation of likely the most innovative Chef de Cave at Charles Heidsieck, the late Daniel Thibault, who can be credited with doing much to push this Champagne to the forefront for wine collectors. It debuted in 1993 with the release of the 1983 vintage. That innovation and inspiration has continued with the current Chef de Cave, Cyril Brun.

The 'Blanc des Millénaires' is made entirely from Chardonnay grapes and is vinified in stainless steel with full malolactic fermentation. No oak is used. The grapes in the *assemblage* are picked from the best sites of the Côte des Blancs coming from four *grands crus* vineyards (Oger, Le Mesnil-sur-Oger, Avize and Cramant) and one premier cru vineyard (Vertus). It's an insider's Champagne as the quality is high with complexity and depth at a fraction of what you would pay for a 1995 Champagne from any other house.

This 1995 showed toasty aromas on the nose with purity of fruit expression with crisp apples and lemony citrus notes and a refined tension on the palate. It's not a heavy Champagne, and it displays concentration and balance. The *dosage* is likely the highest of the wines featured at the dinner at 10.5 grams per litre, yet it didn't come across as sweet or rich in character, rather it was well integrated with the rest of the elements of the wine.

1995 Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs (based in Reims)

'Comtes de Champagne' is the most prestigious cuvée by Taittinger. Since 1952, they have made this cuvée in 35 vintages. It's made from 100% Chardonnay meticulously harvested from 5 villages with *grands crus* classification (Oger, Le Mesnil-sur-Oger, Avize, Chouilly, and Cramant). Only the best grapes are used, and the first press juice is retained. Approximately 5% of the blend is aged in new oak. Bottles are resting in the cellar for up to ten years before disgorgement and release.

As we moved to Taittinger, the flavours became richer and riper on the nose with a creamier texture on the palate. This Champagne showed aromas of cinnamon, toasted almonds, baked apples and pears, sweet pastry with a lemon curd citrus underneath.



SECOND FLIGHT

Moët & Chandon Champagne Dom Pérignon P2 and Bollinger R.D. Extra Brut

1995 Moët & Chandon Champagne Dom Pérignon P2 (based in Épernay)

Dom Pérignon is the prestige cuvée of Moët & Chandon. They have 1180 hectares of estate vineyards with some dedicated to Moët, some dedicated to Dom Pérignon and some allocated at the time of blending. The 1921 was the first vintage of Dom Pérignon and along with Cristal it was one of the first prestige cuvées. Dom Pérignon is released after a minimum of seven years of bottle ageing on its lees.

The concept behind Dom Pérignon is to create a blended Champagne of roughly 50/50 Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Moët & Chandon owns the largest amount of vineyards in every grand cru, so they could produce a single vineyard but choose not to. The 'Plenitudes' concept is something Richard Geoffroy developed defining three stages in the life of Dom Pérignon as follows:

P1 – The standard release which was after 7-9 years and is now after 9-10 years;

P2 – Formerly known as 'Oenothèque', and after 12-20 years;

P3 – After 35-40 years, what Geoffroy refers to as the 'plenitude of complexity'.

The P2 and P3 bottles are kept with their original cork standing upside down so the lees settle inside next to the cork. Then, when it's time for disgorgement, the bottles are manually disgorged and checked for cork taint before the new cork is put in the bottle. Richard Geoffroy led Dom Pérignon from 1990 until 2019 when Vincent Chaperon, who had worked with Mr. Geoffroy for thirteen harvests, took over.

For the 1995 harvest, Moët began picking the Chardonnay grapes on the 18th September and the Pinot Noir grapes on the 25th September. On the Dom Pérignon website, they characterize 1995 as 'a very perfect summer.'

This 1995 P2 showed quite youthful in expression with white flowers, white peaches, golden delicious apples with also a bit of under ripe pear and Granny Smith apple aromas and flavours combined with lemon citrus vibrancy on the palate as well as minerality and concentration.





1995 Bollinger R.D. Extra Brut (based in Aÿ) disgorged on 25 November 2005

This Champagne house owns 164 hectares with 85% made up of *grands crus* and *premiers crus* vineyards. It's likely known best as a Champagne of full-bodied weight and structure owing to its concentration of Pinot Noir; in every cuvée they make Pinot Noir is 60% of the blend. This house is also quite special because 60% of the grapes used in their Champagnes comes from estate vineyards.

Bollinger is a Champagne with a distinctive house style. It used to be one that had an oxidative style showing aldehyde notes. Our 1995 R.D. for this dinner was still in the old style. Currently, this Champagne house is trying to prevent oxidative and aldehyde notes in their wines. This style shift started happening with the 2002 and 2003 vintages. Bollinger has also made a commitment to reducing their use of sulphur. They are striving to produce a clean and precise style now.

For the vinification, Bollinger only uses the first and best pressing and ferments in temperature controlled stainless steel and oak barrels. The style of Bollinger is largely driven by its use of oak barrels in both the fermentation and ageing part of the process.

'R.D.' means 'Récemment Dégorgé'; it doesn't necessarily mean recently disgorged but rather is a vintage of 'La Grande Année' that has aged longer on its lees, sometimes as much as twenty years or longer. La Grande Année is aged for at least eight years on its lees (used to be for six years). Bollinger R.D. also has more Chardonnay than La Grande Année with 60% Pinot Noir and 40% Chardonnay making up the blend. The grapes are coming from 16 *grands crus* and 7 *premiers crus*, and the dosage is 3-4 grams per litre which is less than La Grande Année. 1995 R.D. is made from 63% Pinot Noir and 37% Chardonnay.

The 1995 Bollinger R.D. showed the most developed of all the Champagnes during our dinner. Aromas of roasted coffee, cinnamon, nutmeg and clove showed in the glass combined with notes of apple pie and sweet cream pastry. It was mouthcoating with oxidative notes and richness taking centre stage. This wine displayed fully mature characteristics. For some at the dinner, they didn't care for the more mature expression of this 1995. However, it was a delicious match for Howard's Gourmet's Signature Sea Cucumber. The sea cucumber is roasted in the oven giving it a wonderful crispy texture and is accompanied by supreme broth. Both the sea cucumber and broth are rich in flavour, and the broth has a gelatinous texture that the nuttier and earthier notes in the 1995 Bolli R.D. matched up with very well.

THIRD FLIGHT

Philipponnat Champagne 'Clos des Goisses', Pol Roger Cuvée Sir Winston Churchill, and Krug

1995 Philipponnat Champagne 'Clos des Goisses' (based in Aÿ) disgorged in September 2005

The Philipponnat family has been making Champagne in the village of Aÿ since 1522. Their prestige cuvée is the 'Clos des Goisses'; it's a walled vineyard of 5.5 hectares on a 45 degree incline. It's planted to approximately two-thirds Pinot Noir and one-third Chardonnay. The vineyard takes its name from 'Gois' or 'Goisse' which in the local Champagne dialect means very steep slope because it's the steepest vineyard in Champagne. In addition, this vineyard is also the warmest *terroir* in the region with chalky soils and facing south, receiving sunlight from sunrise to sunset with no shade. 'Clos des Goisses', because of its soils and steep terrain, is known for being a minerally-driven Champagne with vibrant acidity.

The wine is partially vinified in wooden barrels (50%), and there is no malolactic fermentation. Then, the wine is aged for approximately ten years in their cellar. It receives very low dosage at just 4.25g/litre.

The first vintage of this cuvée was made in 1935. 'Clos des Goisses' started out as a Chardonnay based Champagne, but since 1964 Pinot Noir has dominated the blend. Usually, now the blend is approximately 65% Pinot Noir and 35% Chardonnay.

This wine was one of the standouts of the evening for its purity of fruit expression and minerality. The low dosage and no malolactic fermentation seems to make for a Champagne that very much speaks of its place and the vintage. On the nose, there were aromas of slightly overripe apple, golden delicious apple, crisp Bosc pear and zesty Meyer lemon citrus. These flavours continued through the palate, and there was a tension throughout leading to a lasting finish.



1995 Pol Roger Cuvée Sir Winston Churchill (based in Épernay)

Pol Roger has 90 hectares of estate owned vines that provide the grapes for 51% of the production. However, primarily they rely on growers that they've had long term relationships with that are located mainly in Épernay and Chouilly.

In terms of the vinification, they use cool temperatures to control the process from handling the must to the primary fermentation and use stainless steel tanks. And in the secondary fermentation the bottles are kept in deep, cool cellars as well. The aim is to produce Champagnes of precision, pure fruit character and longevity. The bottles are hand riddled, and all work in the cellar is done by hand.

The exact blend of Cuvée Sir Winston Churchill is a guarded secret, but it's predominantly Pinot Noir with some Chardonnay coming from *grands crus* vineyards that existed at the time of Churchill. It was created in 1975 ten years after the death of Churchill to celebrate him and his love of Champagne. The first vintage was released in 1984. Cuvée Sir Winston Churchill goes through full malolactic fermentation and is aged almost ten years on its lees.

This 1995 showed aromas of vanilla, sweet baking spices, hazelnuts, poached pear and a rounded, creamy texture on the palate. The richer flavours in this Champagne paired well with Howard's Gourmet's Signature Entrée of Braised Eel, Pork Jowl and fried garlic. Like the 1995 Bollinger R.D., the age and more developed characteristics in the Cuvée Sir Winston Churchill matched the food.

1995 Krug (based in Reims)

The House of Krug was established by Joseph Krug in Reims in 1843 with the goal of making a great Champagne every year regardless of climate variations. With Krug vintage the aim is to blend together the best wines to express the character of the vintage. This notion of producing both a non-vintage and a vintage cuvée was revolutionary at the time that Krug was founded, so it was quite a new concept for Joseph Krug to promote¹. Krug owns just 21 hectares and supplements the rest with grapes from local growers some of which they have been working with from the start.

The 1995 is a blend of 48% Pinot Noir, 35% Chardonnay and 17% Pinot Meunier. Each plot was individually tasted and selected for this vintage Champagne. To promote ageing of their wines at Krug, they pick the grapes with more acidity and less sugar in them. The wine is vinified in 205-litre oak barrels (with the average age of the casks 20 years old) and usually undergoes malolactic fermentation (but they don't do anything to start or to stop it)², so Krug is a bigger, richer style of Champagne with longevity. After fermentation, the wine goes into tanks to promote freshness. It's aged for over ten years in the Krug cellars before release.

The style of Krug combines well with the 1995 vintage which is a vintage of richness and generosity. This Champagne showed toasty aromas and almond notes on the nose combined with crunchy orchard fruits of apples and pears as well as lemon and grapefruit citrus flavours. The palate was concentrated and full-bodied. It was quite youthful in expression and seems to have many years ahead.



FORTH FLIGHT:

**Jacques Selosse Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs ,
Salon 'Le Mesnil' Blanc de Blancs , and
Krug 'Clos du Mesnil' Blanc de Blancs**

1995 Jacques Selosse Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs (based in Avize) disgorged on 14 February 2003

Wine critic and author of ChampagneGuide.net , Peter Liem describes Selosse as follows: 'No champagne grower is as renowned or as influential as Anselme Selosse. Whether directly or indirectly, he has inspired an entire generation of young winegrowers in the region, and among consumers, his champagnes have become some of the most sought-after wines in the world.' Anselme took over from his father Jacques in 1980, and since then has been 'pioneering lower yields farmed according to biodynamic principles and a handmade Burgundian approach quite unlike any other in Champagne.'³

¹ Tyson Stelzer (2017), The Champagne Guide 2018-2019, p. 205.

² Stelzer, p.207.

³ Ibid, p. 191.



Anselme is unique in his approach to making Champagne adopting practices that are quite a step away from the norm like only using indigenous yeast for the fermentations, usually no malolactic fermentation (it's free to happen or not) only bâtonnage, minimizing the use of SO₂, fermentation and ageing in wood barrels (with less than 20% new), leaving wines on their fine lees for extended periods of time, and keeping the dosage at a minimum. I find you either like the Selosse style or you don't. For me, his wines are really the ones that made me take notice and want to explore grower Champagnes. The Selosse labels are incredibly detailed giving the blend, dosage and disgorgement date. For this cuvée the Chardonnay grapes are all from Avize and have come from the same two parcels since 1975.

This 1995 was our overall favourite at the dinner. It drank like a Domaine François Raveneau 'Les Clos' Grand Cru from a warm year in the 1990s. I remember the first time I drank a bottle of Selosse Champagne. My friend poured it blind for me and asked me to guess. My guess was Raveneau 'Les Clos' Grand Cru Chablis. Instead, it was actually a bottle of Selosse Substance Champagne. The 1995 Selosse displayed aromas of baked ripe orchard fruits, almonds, whole wheat bread, portobello mushrooms, and an earthy minerally note. This Champagne was concentrated with a pronounced textural quality akin to white Burgundy rather than what I associate with Champagne. The palate was concentrated with vibrant acidity and left a lasting finish. It is a distinct style that stands out from the rest.

1995 Salon 'Le Mesnil' Blanc de Blancs (based in Le Mesnil-sur-Oger)

Salon is special for a few reasons. It's the smallest of the *grandes marques*, is only made from Chardonnay from the Grand Cru Le Mesnil-sur-Oger village and is only produced in top vintages. The chalky soil in the vineyards promote high acidity in the Chardonnay grapes used in Salon, and that's why it's a wine that benefits from ageing. In 1905 Eugène-Aimé-Salon created Champagne's first blanc de blancs which was supposed to be just for personal consumption.

For the vinification, only the first pressed juice is used, and it's fermented in temperature controlled stainless steel tanks. To preserve the acidity, malolactic fermentation is prevented. Then, the wine is aged for a minimum of ten years before release; ageing varies depending on when they feel the wine is ready. The bottles will be disgorged when the wine is ready for release. All riddling is done by hand. The dosage is usually around 5/6 grams per litre.

This 1995 Salon showed aromas of white flowers, white and yellow peaches and lime citrus with chalky minerality. It's youthful with tension and vibrancy pervading the palate. Structurally, I see why some wine critics liken 1995 to 1988 as this 1995 Salon reminded me of the 1988.

1995 Krug 'Clos du Mesnil' Blanc de Blancs (coming from Le Mesnil-sur-Oger)

This Champagne is made from a special single walled vineyard located in the Grand Cru of Le Mesnil-sur-Oger that comprises 1.8 hectares. It was purchased by Rémi and Henri Krug along with fourteen other plots in 1971 all located in Le Mesnil-sur-Oger. Initially, these Chardonnay grapes were blended, but in 1979, observing the high quality of the wine from this plot called Clos du Mesnil, Krug decided to bottle it separately and so the first Clos du Mesnil was made. Krug Clos du Mesnil is 100% Chardonnay and is a barrel-fermented Champagne.

This wine showed sweet spice aromas of nutmeg and clove with apple and pear fruits combined with bright lime, yuzu and grapefruit citrus. It was youthful in expression while still being expansive and mouth coating on the palate showing the textural influence of the oak.

FIFTH FLIGHT:

1995 Krug 'Clos d'Ambonnay' Blanc de Noirs, 1995 Moët & Chandon Champagne 'Dom Pérignon' Rosé

1995 Krug 'Clos d'Ambonnay' Blanc de Noirs (coming from Ambonnay)

This wine is made from 100% Pinot Noir grown in a 0.68 hectares walled plot in the village of Ambonnay which is known for growing the best Pinot Noir in Champagne; it was purchased in 1994. The 1995 is the first vintage of this Champagne, and it was kept a secret until its release in 2007. Krug chose to make this wine for the first time in 1995 because the winemaking team felt the 1995 vintage expressed the unique attributes of this special walled plot.

The 1995 Krug 'Clos d'Ambonnay' Blanc de Noirs seemed to need more time. It was still very concentrated and all wound up, not revealing very much on the palate. On the nose, this Champagne revealed aromas of brioche, almonds, anise, pear and stone fruits combined with an earthy note of fresh mushrooms. The palate wasn't as giving in flavour; it seems this wine needs more time in the cellar to reveal itself.

1995 Moët & Chandon Champagne 'Dom Pérignon' Rosé (based in Épernay)

The first vintage of Dom Pérignon Rosé was 1959. To make this Rosé, Moët uses the assemblage method of making Rosé Champagne whereby still red wine is added to the base white wine prior to the secondary fermentation. The red wine from their best estate Pinot Noir with old vines is used to make this Rosé Champagne. They use green harvesting in these plots to control the yields to keep the quality at its best.

This Rosé showed floral perfumed aroma and pure red berry fruit notes of strawberries and raspberries. These berry notes were complemented with ruby red grapefruit citrus notes. The mousse was refined and creamy in texture and left a lingering finish on the palate. It was a highlight of the dinner and a reminder of just how good Rosé Champagne can be.

CONCLUSION:

The takeaway from this 1995 Champagne dinner was how underrated 1995 is as a vintage. The quality is high, and they are continuing to age well. There isn't so much in the market, and in general it's quite an affordable vintage. The message overall is to seek out more 1995 Champagne whether for drinking now or keeping in the cellar. If you are interested in experiencing 1995 Champagne, please reach out.



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