

## Champagne Jacquesson, Dizy



Memmie Jacquesson founded his champagne business in 1789 and did so well that Napoleon gave him a medal. In 1835, his son Adolphe took over and had a direct hand in several important innovations. He instituted the radical notion of training vines in rows with the collaboration of Dr. Guyot. He established a base level of sugar in bottles with the aid of a chemist, thus substantially reducing the problem of bottle explosion. Lastly, he patented the wire basket known as the *muselet*, still used today to hold sparkling wine corks in place.

The business left family hands toward the end of the 1800s, and eventually was bought by the Chiquet family in 1974. Today Jacquesson is jointly managed by Jean-Hervé and Laurent Chiquet. Jean-Hervé, once the cellar master, now primarily runs the commercial aspects of the business, while his younger brother Laurent primarily runs the production side and has taken the role of *chef de cave*. The two work closely with their vineyard manager, Sylvain Leblanc. Champagne Jacquesson farms 31 hectares in the grand cru villages of Aÿ, Avize, and Oiry, and in the premier cru villages of Hautvillers, Dizy, and Mareuil-sur-Aÿ. In addition, from these same villages, the Chiquets buy grapes off of 11 hectares from growers with whom they work closely. In Champagne terminology, it would be more accurate to call Jacquesson a large grower rather than a "house."

Sustainable farming practices are the norm here. No herbicides are used and rows are tilled in the spring and fall, with grass sowed in summer. When fertilizers are used, they are entirely organic. Pruning is severe for low yields, there are no green harvests, and canopy management is stressed to ensure minimal mildew and odium pressure, thus holding fungicide sprays to a minimum.

Jacquesson has a small production facility in Dizy, across the river from Epernay. Here, the brothers use vertical presses rather than more abusive horizontal presses. Only juice from the first pressing is used—the press wine itself is sold to *négociants*—and of course all the juice is either from grand cru or premier cru rated vineyards. The juice flows by gravity into steel tanks for 24 hours of settling, after which it is transferred to large neutral wood casks (*foudres*) for several months to undergo alcoholic and malolactic fermentations. The lees are stirred to enrich the wine, a practice that has the additional benefit of providing a naturally reductive environment, keeping the need for SO<sub>2</sub> additions to a minimum. The first racking normally occurs in April or May.

Malolactic fermentation is never blocked because 1) this would require a lot of SO<sub>2</sub>; and 2) low acidity in Champagne grapes is not a concern. Since the fruit that makes the wine always attains an enviable level of ripeness, the dosage is typically in the extra-brut range of one to six grams of sugar per liter. Bottling is done without cold stabilization or filtration. Care is taken with the labels to transparently detail all relevant information about the wine without marketing flourishes. The house produces between 300,000 and 325,000 bottles of wine each year.

So much for the practical aspects. Philosophically, the Chiquet brothers have embarked on a mission to make Champagne as fine wine. This has involved a twofold approach: a fundamental reconsideration of their non-vintage wine, and a move toward single-vineyard wines in an exploration of specific terroirs.

In 2003 Jacquesson jettisoned its Brut Perfection NV in favor of a new non-vintage wine named Cuvée 728 (the number comes from the year 1898, when the house began keeping records of every wine it made, beginning with number 1). Cuvée 728 was the first in a series of non-vintage wines whose identities are grounded in the primary vintage of their composition. This sounds straightforward, but it goes directly against the grain of the prevailing concept that a house's non-vintage wine should be a consistent product without regard for differences in years.

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The aim of the 7-series is to emphasize the best qualities of a given year, rather than to dumb down individual vintages in an effort to make a uniform non-vintage. It's worth noting that this series is being aged progressively longer in bottle; by the time Cuvée 734 is released in May, 2010 it will have had a full three years of bottle age, including four months after disgorgement.

The 7-series then led the brothers to question their classic vintage Champagne. Like most houses, the classic vintage was made only in the best years and was intended to be the best blended wine of the house in those years. But Jean-Hervé and Laurent had decided that the 7-series would be Jacquesson's best blended wine. Thus the decision was taken that the 2002 Millésime would be the final vintage bottling of the house. Going forward, the vintage wines would be limited to the four single-vineyard wines, made only in good years and in very limited numbers, while the house's one blend would be the 7-series. The requirements for the vintage-dated single vineyards are simple: the wine must have a distinct personality, one that reflects its *terroir*, and it is not needed in the 7-series blend.

### Current releases

- *Cuvée 735*: This cuvée is based on 2007 and was released in the autumn of 2011. The winter of 06/07 was the mildest since 1960, and the spring was hot—much as it was in 1997 and 2011—while the overall growing season had record rainfall. Vigorous growth and botrytis were the issues for 2007. Good weather came on August 25<sup>th</sup> and opened the door to a nice crop for those who managed their vineyards well (and reasonable yields quickly translates into healthier vines, thereby making the struggle against rot much easier). The blend for 735 is 47% Chardonnay, 33% Pinot Noir, and 20% Pinot Meunier, with reserve wines from 2006 (22%) and 2005 (6%).
- *Cuvée 734*: This cuvée is based upon the 2006 vintage (73%) and was released in March, 2010, following Cuvée 733 which had been released the year before. The growing season was rather neurotic, beginning with a cold winter, a mild spring, then a heat wave in July followed by a wet, cold August--most of which put viticulturalist Sylvain Leblanc's extensive vineyard work to the test, and it passed admirably. September began hot and dry, and Jacquesson began harvesting under sunny skies on September 11<sup>th</sup>. On the 20<sup>th</sup>, rain returned, and the harvest was quickly wrapped up. A severe selection was made, and the final blend resulted in 54% Chardonnay, 26% Pinot Meunier, and 20% Pinot Noir. The reserve wine used came from the 2005 vintage (22%) and the 2004 vintage (5%).
- *Avize Grand Cru 2000*: Jacquesson began producing a NV blanc de blancs from its Avize holdings in the late 1940s. When the Chiquet brothers took over, one of their first decisions was to make this a vintage bottling. This enabled them to make a better wine and freed up a terrific source of grand cru Chardonnay with which to improve their non-vintage (then the Brut Perfection) in problematic years. Vintage 1990 was the first commercial release. Like the 1990, the 2000 is based upon three lieu-dits: La Fosse, Némery, and Champ Caïn. The next release will be 2002 (available 2010) and this, like future releases, will be based entirely on Champ Caïn's 40-year-old vines, thus freeing up steady sources of grand cru Chardonnay for the 7-series.
- *Dizy Corne Bautray 2000*: During the 1990s the Chiquets were improving their farming and re-discovering their terroirs. Their one hectare (2.5 acres) of Corne Bautray Chardonnay way up on top of a hill above Dizy particularly impressed them in the harvest of 1995, and they made an experimental cuvée from it (2000 was the first commercial release). The vines were planted in 1960, face southwest, and grow in relatively thick alluvial topsoil. This soil is a layer of loose clay-silt packed with pebbles, giving good drainage, and provides a bed as deep as nine feet overtop the ever-present Campanian chalk—which these old vines reach down to for water. The wine is remarkable for its elegant power.
- *Aÿ Vauzelle Terme 2002* (available 2010): The 1996 season favored Pinot Noir, and a tiny parcel of three-quarters of an acre in the Vauzelle Terme lieu-dit stood out for the Chiquets. Corne Bautray pointed the way in '95, and in '96 they bottled an experimental lot of the exceptional Vauzelle Terme. The vines were planted in 1980 and grow in limestone soils mixed with some clay, with chalk bedrock. Vintage 2002 will be the first release of this blanc de noirs.

- *Dizy Terres Rouges Rosé 2003*: After 1997, Jacquesson stopped making blended rosés and moved to a *rosé de macération* from a specific site, which better suited their philosophical outlook. The site chosen was Terres Rouges, on a broad bench up behind Dizy. The red soil is limestone-based on top of chalky silts, and the Chiquets farm nearly 15 acres here. An experimental cuvée of this wine was made in 2002, followed by the first commercial release of 2003. This latter vintage was meager in volume but exceptional in fruit ripeness, and the opportunity to make 5,000 bottles of Pinot Noir rosé proved irresistible.
- *Dizy Terres Rouges Rosé 2004*: After 2003, there was a return to normalcy with the 2004 season. The winter and spring were mild, July was typical, August was cool and wet, and September was hot and dry. Yields in the region were high but at Jacquesson they were, as Jean-Hervé puts it, "sensible." Two parcels of Dizy Terres Rouges were used in 2003 to make the rosé, and these same parcels were used again in 2004. One was planted in 1971 to Pinot Meunier and the other in 1993 to Pinot Noir. The grapes were harvested on September 25th, macerated for thirty hours and the juice was then racked to *foudre*. The color is lighter than the very dark 2003 while retaining the intense fruit and the lovely elegant profile. The blend is 71% Pinot Meunier and 29% Pinot Noir; 750 6-pack cases were produced.
- *Vintage 2000*: The growing season had the highest average temperature recorded since 1956. June was hot, July wet and cold with hailstorms, while August was hotter but still on the wet side. The end of August saw good weather at last, and this held throughout September. Jacquesson began its harvest on September 18th. This is a richly ripe, dry, full-bodied Champagne composed of 50% Chardonnay from Avize "Champ Caïn" and Pinot Noir from Verzenay (20%), Dizy (20%), and Ay "Vauzelle Terme" (10%).
- *Vintage 2002*: The growing season of 2002 was all but perfect, and the grapes were harvested with a balance of ripeness and acid that approached that last seen in the legendary vintage of 1976. The wine has superb structure, succulent fruit, and wonderfully bright minerality. The blend is composed of Chardonnay from Avize (36%) and Chouilly (7%), and Pinot Noir from Dizy (35%), Ay (15%), and Mareuil-sur-Ay (7%). This is the last blended Vintage Champagne Jacquesson will make for the foreseeable future.

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