

IMPORTS TO WATCH



TEXT NICK STOCK

Daring to Innovate

A small Champagne house breaks the non-vintage mould while an emerging talent from Burgundy makes his mark with a top array of wines without actually owning a vineyard.

CHAMPAGNE JACQUESSON – Champagne, France

Jacquesson has been one of the smaller houses adding untold colour to Australia's Champagne market in recent years. But it's a house with a long history. Founded at the end of the 18th century, it grew to reach significant production levels over the ensuing 100 years and garnered a reputation for innovation in production. Tough economic times saw sales decline early in the 20th century and the new owners, the Chiquet family, bought it in the 1970s, moving it to the village of Dizy where it resides today, around the corner from their cousin's (larger) Champagne house, Gaston Chiquet.

It is fair to say that Jacquesson's present generation, with Jean-Hervé Chiquet at the

single numbered cuvee. The rationale is that although the shortcomings of lesser vintages are often addressed via astute blending, the peaks of quality seen in exceptional years are sacrificed too. The net result of Jacquesson's solution to capture the best qualities of strong vintages is a kind of quasi-vintage wine that is based around the expression of one particular year and is celebrated for the character of the harvest. A risky business, but with the release of Cuvée N° 733 Jacquesson has delivered admirably on its quality promise over six releases under this regime.

In addition to the risk of innovation and bucking the weighty tradition of non-vintage Champagne production, the naming of these wines posed a vexing question. The first of these new-style wines, Cuvée N° 728, was

Oyster shell and savoury chalky autolysis arrives amid pink musky florals, citrus rind and gentle marzipan.

helm, has had an eye firmly fixed on quality and distinction since taking over in 1988. The estate farms 30 hectares of its own vineyard and operates another 10 hectares under lease. The family is deeply wedded to the concept of terroir and are certainly utilising every available method to enhance these aspects of their wines, including organic practices.

On the production side there's a traditional face to the Jacquesson story. It operates three flat presses in almost artisan fashion and the cellar is filled with timber casks – a stark contrast to the stainless-steel matrix of most larger Champagne houses. The house differs from the norm in philosophy too, championing quality ahead of the Champenoise obsession with similarity and consistency.

The most definitive statement of this is the Jacquesson concept of effectively replacing the all important non-vintage wine with a

simply named with a back of house number as it appeared on the production records. The quality and character of the wine did the rest of the talking.

Dosage is another distinguishing aspect of Jacquesson Champagne; it is markedly lower than the more common 9-11 grams of sugar per litre of wine, more in the realm of 3-5 grams per litre, truly extra brut. Vintage information, the breakdown of the blend and dosage are all listed on the back label of the numbered cuvee wines, a key to understanding and appreciating the Jacquesson response to each vintage's unique bounty.

Champagne Jacquesson Cuvée N° 733 (A\$95/NZ\$95) is freshly released and based on the 2005 harvest with a small (16 per cent) component from 2004 and a dash (6 per cent) of 2001 reserve wine. Driven by excellent chardonnay fruit, it displays brightness and

purity, very fruit expressive on the nose, some citrus, beeswax, a floral note and chalk. The palate boasts a smoky edge with an almost meaty fruit texture, savoury earthy pinot meunier notes and a grilled nutty flavour at the finish. Roundness and finesse combine in a fine sense of balance; harmonious, complete and astutely characterised.

At the pointy end of their offering is the 2000 Champagne Jacquesson Avize Grand Cru (A\$140/NZ\$135), a blanc de blancs from three vineyard parcels in the village of Avize. The season was characterised by higher-than-average temperatures and wet, volatile July weather that included the dreaded onslaught of hail. Unfiltered, lees stirred and fermented in oak, chardonnay's delicate fruit is framed in savoury complexity. Oyster shell and chalky autolysis arrives amid pink musky florals, citrus rind and gentle marzipan. The palate is rich yet focused with a long savoury chalk and nut finish – truly a wine of terroir and very distinctive indeed.

FRÉDÉRIC MAGNIEN – Burgundy, France

Enjoying Burgundy is about many things, not least of which is mastering the form guide of producer rankings. They all tend to have their strengths: some work away at the top and stake their name on the greatest crus from the most famous sites, others beaver away with fruit from lesser-known vineyards, delivering higher quality than expected.

Frédéric Magnien is one of those rare domaines that is delivering workable, flavour-some and rich generic Bourgogne wines as well as hammering away at the finer points of grand crus such as Bonnes Mares and Echézeaux. He's a highly rated emerging talent who has managed to get more than a toe-hold in a region that is hard to break into. If you love Burgundy, you need to know about his wines.

He gathered experience working first alongside his father at Domaine Michel Magnien in Morey-Saint-Denis from 1987 to 1991. He then travelled to California where he worked with Josh Jensen of Calera fame. Add to this a harvest with our own Gary Farr (in his Bannockburn days) and another link emerges to Morey-Saint-Denis – that of Domaine Dujac and the Seysses family. Jensen and Farr both have strong ties with the Seysses clan and their approach to pinot noir at Domaine Dujac, as does Frédéric Magnien.

Magnien then enrolled at university in Dijon for formal winemaking training and in 1995 he registered his own name with the intention of hanging out his shingle. His model is one that breaks from tradition and involves no ownership of vineyards. He can thus access parcels of grapes grown on sites he can't afford to buy. The wines are excellent, fusing a broad horizon of experience, a clear-headed talent and high-quality fruit.

The first rung 2006 Frédéric Magnien Bourgogne Pinot Noir (A\$47) delivers bright, expressive cherry fruit in a direct and appealing way that is all too rarely seen at this generic level. Finely fragrant and lifted with bright, fresh perfume, some deeper undergrowth notes build with air. Plenty of presence on the palate with grainy satisfying tannins, this is a drink-now proposition that brushes the soul of Burgundy with a modern hand.

2006 Frédéric Magnien Côte du Nuits-Villages Croix-Violette (A\$77) is a step into deeper, more meaty territory. Plenty of savoury barrel-derived spice and toast with violets and lively cherry perfume, it showcases the approachable nature of the '06 vintage. Straight-shooting palate shape with bright acid, fine tannins and a top coat of finesse. Terrific value.

2006 Frédéric Magnien Chambolle-Musigny 1er cru Borniques (A\$190) makes a strident step into modern Burgundian territory. The wine is open and welcoming with plenty of rich fruit, hoisin sauce and gentler oak than the Croix Violette. The palate is open-knit and welcoming with silken Chambolle tannin, dark cherry flavour – brimming with generous appeal.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY PABLO MARTIN. PRICES ARE APPROXIMATE; WHERE UNLISTED, WINES ARE NOT AVAILABLE IN THAT COUNTRY. TO SOURCE WINES, SEE PAGE 171.