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THE
CHAMPAGNE
GUIDE
2014-2015

TYSON
STELZER



THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE CHAMPAGNE REGION

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CHAMPAGNE
GUIDE
2014-2015

Praise for the 2011 edition
‘EXCELLENT ... THOROUGHLY RECOMMENDED.’ – JANCIS ROBINSON

TYSON STELZER



JACQUESSON

(Zhak-soh)

9/10

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No champagne house today is on a trajectory of ascent as steep as Jacquesson. While many houses are on the prowl for more fruit to increase production, Jacquesson is drastically slashing its yields and its contracts to radically improve quality in spite of lowering quantity. When others set out to make a consistent blend every year, Jacquesson throws uniformity to the wind to draw the best blend out of every vintage. Each time I look, this little house in the village of Dizy appears more like a fanatical grower producer. Purely on the refinement of its current cuvées, Jacquesson has leapt from ranking among Champagne's top 20 houses to a lofty position among its top 10.

THE CONCEPT OF NON-VINTAGE CHAMPAGNE HAS never sat quite right with me. Blending multiple vintages to deal with the ups and downs of the seasons makes sense. But creating a consistent style that tastes the same every year has never seemed quite right.

When a particularly blessed season arrives, why must it always be dumbed down for the sake of uniformity? Or must it?

'We were making a regular non-vintage at Jacquesson until we became progressively frustrated with it,' Jean-Hervé Chiquet told me as we tasted his oddly named Cuvée No 734 in the tasting room of the family estate in Dizy.

'We face such vintage variation at this extreme, with fantastic vintages followed by disasters, that our ancestors found that the only way to handle the seasons was to blend vintages to produce consistent wine. This is why 90% of Champagne's production does not carry a vintage. In spring 1998 we were working on our non-

vintage from 1997 base and we found a blend that was very nice, but not the same as the previous non-vintage and not able to be reproduced. At the time, we made an inferior wine to match the consistency of the house. We decided then that there should be a better rule. We thought, what happens if we don't try to imitate what we did last year, but start from a blank sheet of paper and make the best wine that we can every year?'

And so Cuvée 728 was born from 2000 vintage base. A different blend every year is reflected by a consecutively rolling number (1272 less than the vintage year) — a 'stupid number', according to Jean-Hervé. 'But two things don't change: the fruit sources and the taste of the two guys who do the blend!'

RADICAL CHANGE

Those two guys are brothers Jean-Hervé and Laurent Chiquet, whose family purchased the company in 1978 and transferred its headquarters to their own family's



historic estate. 'I spent 10 years campaigning to my father that we could do something differently,' Jean-Hervé says.

'Then in 1988 he allowed me and my brother to take over and we spent 12 years changing everything about the structures of the company and the vineyards. But in 2000 we realised that the changes were not reflected in the wines, so it was then that we changed the entire range. We took big risks in changing the style to introduce the 700 series. A risk of losing most of our customers and a risk of big investment with no return for some years. We had to be good friends with our bank manager!'

While 2002 marked the turning point, even a small champagne house is like an ocean liner and it takes a generation to turn around. 'Our last Late Disgorged 2002 will be sold between 2019 and 2021, from a regime we started talking about in 1978, so it takes 43 years for the change to fully take effect.' And the Jacquesson revolution is far from over yet.

The house has introduced a series of drastic changes to raise quality in recent vintages. At a time when many houses are seeking to extend their fruit sources, Jacquesson has radically initiated just the opposite. Yields were lowered in 2008 at the same time as fruit purchases were strategically slashed from 40 hectares to just eight, lowering annual production of 350,000 bottles by 23%, with estate vines now supplying almost 80% of needs. 'The quality of what we grow means we are less satisfied with the fruit we buy, so we dropped those vineyards that were not up to the standard of our rising expectations,' Jean-Hervé declares.

Further, the age of release of the 700 series has been progressively stepped up, from three years on lees for Cuvée 733 (2005 base) to four years for Cuvée 736 (2008), with the hope of stretching Cuvée 739 (2011) to 4.5 years. Meanwhile, allocations have been further lowered by holding back an average of 15,000 bottles from each release since Cuvée 733, to release as a Late Disgorged 700 series from 2014, with an additional 4–5 years of bottle age. These are radical measures for any wine region, unheard of for a champagne house, and reflect resoundingly in Cuvée 736.

FANATICAL GROWER

Jacquesson's cuvées are complex blends that age impressively and reflect the intricate attention to detail applied at every step of their creation. This begins in the vineyards. According to Jean-Hervé, there are five factors in wine: 'Terroir, viticulture, viticulture, viticulture and winemaking!' He describes Jacquesson as a grower more than a champagne house, and himself



Jean-Hervé Chiquet expounds rigorous principles to drastically slash yields in his vineyard in Dizy.

and his brother as 'frustrated growers'. It is this philosophy that underpins the recent transformation of the house.

Their goal in the vineyards is to grow less fruit, slightly riper, to draw out the mineral character of the terroir. Jacquesson directly controls 30 hectares of enviably located premier and grand cru vineyards, in Dizy, Aÿ, Hautvillers and Avize, with an additional eight hectares sourced from contract growers in the same villages, who Jean-Hervé describes as 'neighbours and friends'. The estate has experimented with organics, with 10 hectares now fully organic, and the remainder run under a minimal-sulphur regime. When I questioned why full organic certification was not the agenda, Jean-Hervé's sensible response was, 'We are here to make good wine as our primary priority.' And 2012 was a strong case in point, with his organic fruit lost to mildew. 'I have always been convinced that a 100% organic system is not reasonable in Champagne's climate,' he explains.

Jacquesson has recently encountered an unexpected menace to particularly ripe fruit. 'We try to harvest one of our single vineyards as late as possible, and in 2012 wild boar came in from the nearby woods and ate 1.2 tonnes — 800 bottles — in one night!'

Traditional methods are used throughout: little or no soil improvers, no herbicides or pesticides, minimal spray regimes, use of ploughing, cover crops

between rows, and pruning to control vigour and limit yields to an average of around 60hL/hectare, just two-thirds of Champagne's average. 'The problem with Champagne is that every grower considers the maximum yield permitted by the appellation to be an economic minimum,' he admits. He describes cover cropping as particularly effective in controlling yields, but acknowledges that until recent environmental priorities became prominent, this was practised by significantly fewer than 1% of Champagne growers.

Jacquesson's attention in the vineyard allows its cuvées to capture the expression of the soil, exemplified in its trilogy of single-vineyard, single-varietal, single-vintage wines produced in minuscule volumes from three special little plots in Aÿ, Dizy and Avize. 'Terroir is the most unfair part of the wine business — you either have the right place or you don't!' Jean-Hervé says. 'It is very important to talk about terroir in champagne.' And talk terroir these cuvées do, articulating chalk mineral textures of disarming clarity.

HANDS-OFF WINEMAKING

Jacquesson's scrupulous practices in the vineyard are mirrored in its hands-off approach in the winery. All fruit used by the house is pressed in its own press houses. 'Pressing is very important in champagne because we have this stupid idea of making white wine from red grapes!' he exclaims. 'We must hand-pick and press close to the vineyard or we'll end up with jam.'

Gentle vertical presses are used, and the very first juice is removed 'because it has washed the outside of the grapes'. Each parcel is vinified separately in large oak foudres to allow the wine to breathe, after which it is left on lees and stirred for several months. This process produces creaminess and body, and has an antioxidant effect, reducing sulphur dioxide additions.

'Malolactic fermentation is the eternal debate in Champagne,' Jean-Hervé suggests. 'We favour malolactic fermentation as we don't want to use heavy sulphur dioxide additions or filtration.' There is also no fining, 'to maintain the aromatic potential of the fruit'.

All Jacquesson cuvées have been extra brut (less than 6g/L dosage) since 2000, although the current Cuvée 736 is the first to display this on its label. 'We never intended to make extra brut, but we just don't think our wines need more dosage,' says Jean-Hervé.

Dosages have become progressively lower, but this trend has never been a conscious decision. 'Some of our wines have no dosage, not because we wanted to make zero-dosage wine but because they were better wines this way,' he says.

Back labels are among the most informative of any champagne house, shamelessly declaring disgorgement date, dosage, base vintage, blend and even precise production quantities. There are no secrets here, just great champagnes, and better than ever. As Jean-Hervé puts it, 'At Jacquesson, we just want to grow great fruit and make great wines.'



JACQUESSON CUVÉE NO 736 EXTRA BRUT NV • \$\$

96 points • DISGORGED JULY 2012 • TASTED IN DIZY

66% 2008, 34% 2007 and 2006; 53% chardonnay, 29% pinot noir, 18% pinot meunier; vinified in casks on lees with regular bâtonnage (lees stirring); 1.5g/L dosage; 273,000 bottles

The planets aligned in 2008, when the vintage of the decade coincided with Jacquesson's tearing up of every contract for fruit that wasn't up to scratch. It goes without saying that this is the finest 700 series release from Jacquesson yet, but it's more than that: its breathtaking elegance and electric brilliance position it firmly among Champagne's very finest entry NVs this year. The coiled expression of 2008 is encapsulated in concentrated focus of lemon blossom, lemon zest, granny smith apple and white peach. A beautifully linear and chiselled champagne of brilliant mineral presence and fresh lemon acidity, finishing very long, never hard, with structure seamlessly entwined with lingering citrus and stone fruits. Its sheer endurance will make for an exceedingly long life.



JACQUESSON CUVÉE NO 735 BRUT NV • \$\$

94 points • DISGORGED MAY 2012 • TASTED IN DIZY

72% 2007, 22% 2006, 6% 2005; 47% chardonnay, 33% pinot noir, 20% pinot meunier; vinified in casks on lees with regular bâtonnage (lees stirring); 3.5g/L dosage; 363,000 bottles

The Cuvée 700 series is Jacquesson's primary priority, representing more than 90% of the production of the house, supplemented only by single-vineyard wines in vintages when the blend doesn't need their fruit. The last disgorgement of 735 is a champagne of great depth and complexity, rippling with sumptuous fruit of gorgeous expression and allusions of dried peach, fresh pear, lemon, gingernut biscuits and mixed spice. An enticing and caressing style of creamy bead and soft underlying texture. Drink 735 while 736 comes back to earth.

JACQUESSON DIZY TERRES ROUGES ROSÉ RÉCOLTE EXTRA BRUT 2007 • \$\$\$

95 points • DISGORGED MARCH 2012 • TASTED IN DIZY

Skin contact rosé of pinot noir; 28 hours maceration; 1.35 hectare single vineyard on the boundary of Dizy and Hautvillers, planted 1993; full malolactic fermentation; vinified in oak foudres; 3.5g/L dosage; 7320 bottles

Jacquesson's first skin-contact rosé of pinot noir, born of the frustration of lighter rosés made by the estate in the past, is a benchmark of red-blooded fizz. 'I want to be able to taste that this is a rosé, even in a black glass,' Jean-Hervé declares. 'I wanted to make something where you could really eat, drink and chew the pinot!' He's done just that, with one of champagne's deepest rosés, of unashamedly full crimson hue. If there is a spectrum that begins at champagne rosé and ends at full-bodied red Burgundy, this wine is further progressed than most champagnes, in intensity, structure and food-pairing versatility. It's layered with plums, cherries, even violets, blackberries and roast chestnuts, lingering with great freshness and purity, powered by an engine room of ultra-fine tannins of confident grip. He has no idea of how it will age, but imagines it might develop well — and with these tannins to propel it, I reckon he's right.



JACQUESSON MILLÉSIME 2000 • \$\$\$\$

96 points • DISGORGED 4TH QUARTER OF 2009 • TASTED IN ADELAIDE

50% pinot noir from Aÿ, Verzenay and Dizy; 50% chardonnay from Avize; vinified in cask; 2.5g/L dosage

A gloriously enticing 2000 with not one molecule out of place, as impeccably composed as the day it was released two years ago. Rich summer white fruits, ripe pear and yellow mirabelle plums quickly draw into a taut tail of lemon zest of profound energy, line and persistence. A wine of brilliant poise, inviting generosity and inherent grace, touched by the mature complexity of toast and roast nuts, rising on the finish to great texture of very fine, chalky, faintly salty minerality. Jacquesson ceased making this cuvée after 2002, since its 700 series replaced both a vintage and a non-vintage concept. Snap it up while you can.



JACQUESSON DIZY CORNE BAUTRAY RÉCOLTE EXTRA BRUT 2004 • \$\$\$\$\$

95 points • DISGORGED OCTOBER 2012 • TASTED IN BRISBANE

South-west facing single-vineyard Dizi on the boundary with Aÿ, planted 1960 on millstone-grit gravel over clayey marl and Campanian chalk; 100% chardonnay; vinified and aged in oak casks on lees; unfiltered; zero dosage; 5400 bottles

Such is the immense tidal wave of surging, heaving salt minerality of overwhelming texture that crashes through the palate of this dizzying chardonnay that it might fool the unsuspecting with the impression that it's phenolically heavy. It's not. This is the voice of the soil over the tones of the fruit and the expression of the barrels. It's powerful and pristine, with distinctive characters of cherry kernel, fennel, ginger, apple, lemon zest and Campari forming an intense background track to its mineral solo. It needs at least five years to calm down before daring to approach, and will likely live a lifetime.

JACQUESSON DIZY CORNE BAUTRAY RÉCOLTE BRUT 2002 • \$\$\$\$\$

97 points • DISGORGED FEBRUARY 2011 • TASTED IN DIZY

As above, except vinified in a 40hL foudre; full malolactic fermentation; aged 8 years on lees; zero dosage; 5300 bottles

This is one of the most profound chardonnays of the Vallée de la Marne, yet from a site where no one believed good chardonnay could be grown, discovered only by the Chiquets when a 1995 vin clair stood out. The mineral impression of this wine is inexplicable, from a site with chalk no less than 2.5 metres under the surface, in a village unrecognised for chardonnay of structure. Its violent, deep, frothing, salty minerality fills the palate with immense texture, drawn out with incredible persistence by super-focused acidity. Such is its aromatic intensity that I could smell it the moment it was poured on the table before me. Wonderful layers of yellow summer fruits leap out of the glass amid nougat, brioche and almond aromas. Its mineral structure and lively acidity control this intensity on the palate, propagating a finish that does not stop.



JACQUESSON AVIZE CHAMP CAÏN RÉCOLTE EXTRA BRUT 2004 • \$\$\$\$\$

95 points • DISGORGED OCTOBER 2012 • TASTED IN BRISBANE

Due south-facing single-vineyard Avize; 1.3 hectares; planted 1962 on surface chalk; 100% chardonnay; vinified and matured in oak casks on lees; unfiltered; 1.5g/L dosage; 10,000 bottles

This blanc de blancs gives the impression of generosity, then quickly pulls into a chiselled and streamlined vector of crunchy pear and apple fruit, with a crisp grapefruit zest finish, accented with pristine aromas of pure apple blossom and a hint of nutmeg. Deep layers of fine, salty minerality are amplified by subtle barrel and fruit structure, and the textural influence of long lees ageing. An intricately structured champagne that will require at least five years to put flesh on its tense frame.



JACQUESSON AVIZE CHAMP CAÏN RÉCOLTE BRUT 2002 • \$\$\$\$\$

96 points • DISGORGED FEBRUARY 2011 • TASTED IN DIZY

As for the Extra Brut 2004, except vinified in 75hL oak casks with lees stirring; full malolactic fermentation; aged 8 years on lees; 2g/L dosage; 6400 bottles

Nuances of exotic spice weave seamlessly amid white peach and fig, with notes of vanilla and nougat. A beautifully gauged hint of flinty reduction gives an air of sophistication to tight grapefruit and lemon aromas. Chalk minerality is soft, subtle and understated, in a graceful and elegant style of prolonged persistence and exacting poise. Signature Avize.

JACQUESSON AÏ VAUZELLE TERME RÉCOLTE EXTRA BRUT 2004 • \$\$\$\$\$

96 points • DISGORGED OCTOBER 2012 • TASTED IN BRISBANE

Tiny plot of just 0.3 hectare, due south-facing on the mid-slope of AÏ, not far from the Dizy border; planted by Jean-Hervé Chiquet in 1980 on calcerous soil 60-70 cm over chalk bedrock; 100% pinot noir; vinified and matured in oak casks on lees; unfiltered; 1.5g/L dosage; less than 1800 bottles

This tiny pocket is Jacquesson's finest terroir of all, giving birth to a champagne for long contemplation in large glasses, and preferably not for at least five years, if not ten. Six months post-disgorgement, it's coiled up tight. Understated aromas of apple, pear and nougat open into an impeccably poised palate, a celebration of the fine, textural structure of chalk and the mouthfeel of lees age in barrel. The finish is propelled by apple and pear fruit, defining by well-structured, quince-like texture, taut acidity and deep-set minerality. In time, pinot noir finally declares its presence, as introverted cherry and red berry fruits begin to unravel. Patience.



JACQUESSON AÏ VAUZELLE TERME RECOLTE BRUT 2002 • \$\$\$\$\$

98 points • DISGORGED FEBRUARY 2011 • TASTED IN DIZY

As above, except vinified and aged in a 20hL oak cask with bâtonnage (lees stirring); full malolactic fermentation; aged 8 years on lees; 2g/L dosage; less than 2200 bottles

The greatest Jacquesson cuvée I have tasted, and an entrancing paradox: so light and fresh that it will lift you clean off the ground, yet reverberating with monumental depth of the most pristine red cherry and strawberry fruits. There's a breath of rose petal perfume, a glimpse of lemon blossom, darting notes of anise, slices of crunchy granny smith apple and flickers of spice. Its mineral depth is cavernous and immensely chalk-infused. With undeviating length and unwavering line, this is a champagne so complete it defies resistance. Few will ever experience what magnificence will unfold when it one day reaches its glorious maturity.



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