

## GROWERCHAMPAGNE

# Small is beautiful ... and bubbly

Grower Champagne is attracting attention as small producers increase their focus on sustainability, authenticity and the environment, writes [Ruma Singh](#), who met several Champagne producers brought over by Cellar 33 at ProWine Mumbai 2024

Champagne is all about celebration – glittering champagne soirées starring Hollywood celebrities, and the breathtakingly grand, historic Champagne Houses that line the Avenue de Champagne in Épernay. Right? Not entirely. The last few years have seen a gradual but steady shift in the way many wine lovers approach champagne. While the grandes marques – Champagne’s top brands – still rule the roost in this premium wine market, there has been a growing appreciation for producers of another kind. Called Récoltants Manipulants (RM) or champagne growers, they produce wine from grapes grown in their own vineyards and vinified at their own estates.

This shift fits with the world’s gravitation towards unique, artisanal products, says Sophie Gounel of **Champagne Gounel Lassalle**. “Drinkers are increasingly attracted to experimentation beyond the big brands, to products that reflect specific terroirs and distinct production methods. They are seeking a change from conventional choices.” Sophie and her husband Arnaud vinify three hectares in the Premier Cru village of Chigny-les-Roses in Montagne de Reims, one of Champagne’s main wine-growing sub-

regions. Certified HVE (High Environmental Value) and VDC (Sustainable Viticulture in Champagne), they are currently in the process of converting to organic practices.

Social media helps in spreading the story in a space where celebrity endorsements do not exist, points out Sophie. “Super-fast access to information via social networks and online platforms makes it easier to discover new wines. Peer recommendations, reviews and specialist

blogs encourage wine lovers to explore lesser-known options.”

Today, many of Champagne’s 19,000 small growers, who once supplied the grandes marques, have moved away to produce their own small-batch wines. This rise in popularity of grower champagnes has been a noticeable trend reflected in the Grower Champagne Report 2023 by Essi Avellan MW, where many of these champagnes scored over 95 points.

Harvest in progress at Champagne Piot-Sévillano



“The demand is increasing every year,” explains Paul Froissart, owner of **Champagne Lafalise Froissart**, a champagne grower producing 20,000 bottles annually from its vineyards in the Grand Cru villages of Verzenay and Verzy. “It is not just a trend. It is the expression of terroir that a grower is able to express.”

Jérôme Gros Lambert, director-winemaker at the highly-rated **Champagne François Secondé**, concurs. “Today’s consumers seek authenticity, something tangible and concrete. Consumers want to know the producer who produces the Champagne they buy.”

In France itself, consumers are showing a growing interest in products that reflect a sense of place, with reports indicating that RM or grower champagnes account for around 20-25% of total champagne sales today. While France remains a key market, export opportunities for RM champagnes are also growing, with the USA leading Japan, Germany and the UK. According to data from Champagne’s administrative body Comité Champagne, the proportion of RM champagnes exported is rising steadily.

“The desire to experience quality and complexity is evident,” says Théodore Lacroix of **Champagne Lacroix Triaulaire**, whose eight-hectare vineyard in the Côte des Bar is dedicated primarily to Pinot Noir, the region’s signature variety. “The mix of tradition and modernity gives real personality to the wines.”

A champagne grower or RM is “rooted into our land but carries a global and modern vision when it comes to branding, communication, viticultural practices and vinification,” believes Christine Sévillano of **Champagne Piot-Sévillano**, a 10th-generation producer in Vallée de la Marne’s Vincelles village. “We have all the advantages to please today’s new generations because our story is real. I think this is what people want: truth, credibility and the luxury of experiencing a precious, simple moment.” Of course, this model is not without its problems.



Photo by: Hubert Lapointe

Family owned Champagne R. Favier grows 80% Meunier grapes on its single-cru estate

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“We don’t have a big group behind us to invest heavily and so achieving our goals takes time, especially in this era of uncertainty due to global warming.”

Another lasting or ongoing trend is the rise of single-vineyard champagnes, which allow producers to showcase the terroir and identity of their region. In Essi Avellan MW’s report, the most highly-rated champagnes reviewed were single-vineyard wines.

Today’s producers view winemaking as not just a business venture, but often as a family-run labour of love, as in the case of husband-and-wife duo, Arnaud and Sophie Gounel who left independent careers to make champagne in the Montagne de Reims. Paul Froissart of Champagne Lafalise Froissart is the 6th generation grower in his family. He bears the responsibility of continuing the family tradition, but adds, “Champagne



Lafalise Froissart produces 20,000 bottles annually from its vineyards in the Grand Cru villages of Verzenay and Verzy

Lafalise Froissart is in the Grand Cru village of Verzenay, so I must respect the heritage of generations.”

Christine Sévillano’s grandfather was the first in the family to produce champagne from his own grapes 70 years ago. Prior to that, the grapes were sold to the grandes marques. “I know each of the 40 plots in my eight hectares by heart – the composition of the soil, their exposition, how the vines are doing and what kind of champagne each can make. I was born and raised in Vincelles and the strength of a RM producer or small grower lies in his proximity to the vines. This year, I replanted a plot together with my family, because I know that these baby vines will live 40 to 50 years and thus, it will not be me, but my children who will replant the vineyard again.”

Terroir is unique, and this becomes a singular strength of the RMs. While the

**An ongoing trend is the rise of single-vineyard champagnes, which allow producers to showcase the terroir and identity of their region**

Gounels treasure their vineyards in Chignyles-Roses, Champagne François Secondé is proud of its location in Sillery, another of Champagne’s Grand Cru villages. Owning 5.5 hectares of vineyards, planted on shallow soil with a subsoil of chalk, François Secondé is the sole RM producing pure **Sillery Champagne**. The wines became popular in the court of King Henry IV, and by the 18th century, Sillery’s wines had reached legendary status, with Edme Bégouillet, a noted critic, declaring that “their quality is so superior that only the king deserves them.” A tradition that the producer strives to uphold even today. “Sillery chalk is different from that of the rest of Champagne,” says Jérôme Gros Lambert, “It imbues its wines with a beautiful acidity, freshness and finesse.”

Champagne Lafalise Froissart makes organic Grand Cru wines in Verzenay, one

of the 17 Grand Cru villages in Champagne. “The terroir here is distinctive, and is one of the main reasons why Verzenay is so famous. As the climate changes, it is my job to adapt to these changes,” says Paul Froissart. His intimate knowledge of the terroir helps.

The dominant grapes used in Champagne are usually Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, with Pinot Meunier playing a supporting role. No longer. Many RM producers today are turning their focus to the underutilized Meunier.

This reflects their desire and ability to experiment, believes Sophie. “It enables winemakers to stand out from the crowd, attracting customers looking for new tasting experiences. This is a great advantage, as the big brands have very little Meunier growing in their estates, buying them solely for their blends.”

**W**ell-known owner and winemaker David Faivre of the family-owned **Champagne R. Faivre** is one among those who embrace the differences. “Historically, in the village of Belval-sous-Châtillon, Meunier makes up 92% of the vineyards. Our single-cru estate grows 80%. Meunier has a later bud break than Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, so is significantly less susceptible to frost in this marginal region. Belval-sous-Châtillon, in Vallée de la Marne, is the last village in Champagne to begin its harvest!”

The clay-dominated soils of the Marne Valley also allow Meunier to thrive, while giving the wines freshness, salinity and a very light palate feel. To achieve a good balance in the wine, David practices parcel-based vinification and keeps yields moderate.

Growing from just two hectares to eight hectares today, 70% of Champagne Piot-Sévillano’s vineyards are also planted with Meunier. “Earlier, Meunier was considered less noble than Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, but it is finally getting recognized for its quality. We produce a 100% Meunier Champagne called Provocante (Provocative). It is getting



Key figures of Champagne Gouneil Lassalle, which has been certified HVE (High Environmental Value) and VDC (Sustainable Viticulture in Champagne) since 2017



Champagne Lacroix-Triaulaire

trendier to drink Meunier because people want something different and original,” says Christine Sévillano.

On the other hand, terroir dictates Lacroix Triaulaire’s emphasis on Pinot Noir as its hero grape. “On Kimmeridgian limestone, our vineyards are perfect for Pinot Noir. The soil provides the wines with a powerful structure that retains freshness and tension. Besides having personality, these wines hold up very well over time. Here in the Côte des Bar, we grow Pinot Noir that is fruit-driven and full-bodied with a long finish,” explains Théodore Lacroix.

**C**hampagne is the first wine-growing area in the world to have assessed its carbon footprint. Sustainable development is hard-wired into the practices of Champagne



Marie-Claire and Théodore Lacroix tending their vines

makers, according to Comité Champagne. Today, over half the area under vine has secured environmental certification. The target is to achieve 100% by 2030.

“Sustainable viticulture is becoming increasingly important to consumers due to environmental concerns and producers are becoming aware of this, moving towards sustainable practices in response to this demand,” says Sophie Gouneil. “Lutte raisonnée (the ‘reasoned fight,’ implying reduction of chemicals) is becoming widely practised in order to respect the soil and living organisms.” Gouneil Lassalle has been HVE (High Environmental Value) and VDC (Sustainable Viticulture in Champagne) certified since 2017.

Champagne Piot-Sévillano was also certified HVE in 2014, and unofficially converted to organic practices in 2016, adding the high-

value Ecocert Label in 2019 for organic and ecological compliance. In conventional viticulture, vines can be exposed to chemicals, Christine adds, while organic viticulture is based on plants and natural elements such as copper and sulphur to strengthen the vines’ natural immunity. “Weather events due to global warming are increasing every year. There are more hailstorms, late spring frosts, too much rain or years of drought. But we are willing to protect our terroir because we need it to stay in good health,” she says. “My father was one of the first in the village to stop the use of insecticide in the 1990s.”

Théodore Lacroix reveals that Lacroix Triaulaire is in its final stages of converting to organic viticulture. “The 2025 harvest will be our first certified organic harvest. In the past too, we have worked sustainably, so conversion was an obvious next step for us. We are fully aware of climate change and its impact on the vine, the grapes and the soil.”

**D**avid Faivre’s aim is to offer his consumer “pure wines from a demanding and little-known terroir. At every stage, both in the vineyard and winemaking, our environmental footprint guides our decisions,” he says. “The preservation of soil life, reduction of fossil energy, use and rejection of winemaking additives are our guiding principles.”

For Christine, the game changer is the growing global consciousness, especially among younger generations who seek greater value and transparency. “People seek ways to contribute to the global effort towards greater sustainability, and their purchasing power is their most powerful tool. Our role is to explain why it is important to support authentic, family-owned businesses.”

There is a growing sense of evolution, believes Sophie. “These trends testify to a dynamic evolution in the champagne industry, where tradition and innovation coexist to meet the expectations of modern consumers who seek terroir-based wines.” ♦

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