

THE  TIMES

# LUXE



**MODERN COUTURE**

**FIVE OF THE BEST ENGLISH WINES. BY JANE MACQUITTY**



**2010 NYETIMBER 1086 BRUT, SUSSEX**  
Dreamy saline-edged, nutty, toasted brioche of a British bubbly that is every bit as good as a prestige champagne. £150, [fortnumandmason.com](http://fortnumandmason.com)



**EXTON PARK RB 32 RESERVE BLEND BRUT, HAMPSHIRE**  
Scrumptious lemon zest and mineral-edged, single vineyard bubbly, a blend of 32 different reserve wines. £39.99, [selfridges.com](http://selfridges.com)



**2020 SIMPSONS THE ROMAN ROAD CHARDONNAY, KENT**  
A cracking chardonnay, with mouth-watering zingy citrus and fragrant hazelnut spice, from a chalky downland site. £23, [robersonwine.com](http://robersonwine.com)



**2019 KIT'S COTY BACCHUS, KENT**  
Refreshing bosky, elderflower and juicy green apple summer garden sip, fermented and aged in oak barrels. £27.30, [hedonism.co.uk](http://hedonism.co.uk)



**2020 GUSBOURNE PINOT MEUNIER, KENT**  
A rare pinot meunier, our answer to beaujolais, which is bursting with delicious bright, tangy, floral morello cherry fruit. £29, [gusbourne.com](http://gusbourne.com)

# ABSOLUTE CORKERS

SOME OF THE MOST FABULOUS CHAMPAGNES ARE MADE BY TINY PRODUCERS. POP THEM WHILE YOU CAN, SAYS NINA CAPLAN

**'C**HAMPAGNE TO MY REAL FRIENDS... and real pain to my sham friends!" sang out the artist Francis Bacon as he approached the bar, which was often. He didn't invent this clever phrase; people have been wishing pain on their false acquaintances for centuries. Although he probably didn't have the agony we have now of not knowing which tippie to drink. Previously, names such as Dom Pérignon, Krug, Bollinger and Roederer conjured excitement even in those who never drank them. But these days we can also choose from dozens of smaller producers who make equally extraordinary bottles.

Unlike the big brands, or *grandes marques*, small growers aren't famous – except to those who know. And finding the best can be, as Bacon might say, a real pain. Most estates consist of a winemaking owner and their family, all busy tending vineyards that never see a pesticide or herbicide (lots follow biodynamic practices, which are even more labour-intensive). And they certainly don't have the time or manpower to welcome visitors; when I visit Raphaël Bérèche at his winery, an old pair of trainers propped outside the door doesn't prepare me for the fabulous wines he makes from only 9.5 hectares.

One of the few smaller marques that do welcome guests is the great Champagne Jacques Selosse, whose owners have the lovely ten-room hotel-restaurant Les Avisés in Avize – although they also have a sign warning guests not to assume there will be any of their sought-after wines for sale. That's not because they're cheap and so are sold out (Dom Pérignon 2012 starts at £150 while the only Jérôme Prévost 2012 La Closerie Les Béguines I've seen

available was £800). It's availability. While there are millions of bottles of Dom Pérignon made, these guys rarely make more than five figures.

To taste bottles from more small growers, I went to the expert, Daniel Pires, chef sommelier at the Royal Champagne Hotel & Spa. It is said that Napoleon Bonaparte stayed here when it was a humble hilltop inn. Another champagne fan ("In victory, you deserve it, in defeat you need it!"), Bonaparte would probably appreciate its present incarnation. The fine-dining restaurant has a Michelin star but I love the bistro, where you sit above vineyards rolling away beyond the terrace, they fillet your sole meunière at the table and, most importantly, the champagne list is a marvel.

Pires is thrilled by young growers. "Alexandre Chartogne!" he says of the owner of Chartogne-Taillet, who has 12 hectares in Merfy, north of Reims: "His work with pinot meunier is *magnifique!*" He pours another pinot meunier, Champagne's third grape variety after pinot noir and chardonnay, by Dehours & Fils, 40km south in the Marne Valley, which is delicious, woody and savoury with a floral top note, as if strewn with a layer of petals.

From an 800-strong list, Pires showed me several single-variety champagnes: a reminder that growers, with their smaller palette, can make a virtue of constraint. Each came with a story. Erick De Sousa doesn't just make beautiful chardonnay grand-cru champagne that tastes of citrus and honey, he is the grandson of a Portuguese soldier who fought at Verdun in the First World War. The heavy clay in Maxime Oudiette's vineyards is known as *terre amoureuse* (besotted earth) because it clings to your shoes like a smitten lover. Clement & Fils' gorgeous rosé champagne, Fraiserat, was named for a flower near the vines by its maker, a passionate botanist.

I seem to fall for a new star grower every time I pick up a glass: Ulysse Collin, Larmandier-Bernier, Egly-Ouriet, Frédéric Savart. Recently, I opened a Lelarge-Pugeot, yet another pinot meunier, inhaled dried apricots, cinnamon and hazelnuts, and thought, "My real friends are in for a real treat."

There are millions of bottles made by big houses, while these guys rarely hit five figures