

# POWER AND GLORY



## 1996 VINTAGE CHAMPAGNE DECONSTRUCTED

Hailed as one of the great vintages of the 20th century, the 1996 is simultaneously lively and intense, with a creamy texture and a concentration of fruit. Notes of brioche and limestone or slate-like minerality are common, while a fresh zing of lemon, pomelo and grapefruit imparts a touch of youthfulness. A few of the wines have a whiff of truffle about them; all are powerful.

THE HORIZONTAL: 1996 VINTAGE

# AGING WITH GRACE

Nearly 20 years on, the 1996 vintage in Champagne is beginning to assume stellar status, showing generous but supremely balanced proportions of ripeness, density and verve. CHARLES CURTIS tastes 34 of the best.

The 1996 vintage is thrilling, producing wines that will age gracefully for 50 years or more. The reason for this quality is simply that there is more of everything: more ripeness, more extract, more concentration and – importantly – more acidity than almost any previous vintage. It ranks alongside 1928 and 1955 as one of the greatest years for Champagne in the 20th century. The added bonus is that, unlike those two vintages, bottles from 1996 are still widely available.

The season didn't carry the hallmarks of a great vintage. It started well, with a fine spring, and although the flowering was slightly affected by millerandage (irregular fruit set leading to both small and large berries in the same bunch), this served to limit yields and improve concentration. However, the hot, damp summer raised fears of rot and mildew, and cool weather in September made growers wonder if their grapes would ripen. Luckily, the warmth returned just before the end of the season, while cool nights allowed the grapes to retain brilliant acidity. The result is powerful, concentrated wines that show great balance and will age beautifully for decades.

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## THE RANKING



## THE TOP TWO

Krug Clos du Mesnil  
Blanc de Blancs

100

A monumental wine: absolutely superb. Just now opening up, with a hint of coconut and tropical fruit along with candied citrus peel, woodsmoke and minerality. The texture is beguiling, with the once-sharp edges now slightly rounded and an expressive, creamy density that lingers exceptionally on the palate. Without question, this is the greatest Champagne of the decade.

Bollinger Vieilles Vignes  
Françaises Blanc de Noirs

99

Spectacular is the only word for this Blanc de Noirs produced from old Pinot Noir vines (grown on their own roots) in Aÿ. The aroma is supremely rich and toasty, with an almost red berry fruit character. Creamy and dense, and more about power than finesse, the wine-like character is very pronounced, and the finish astonishingly long. One of the great Champagne experiences out there.

## THE CONTENDERS

### Diebolt-Vallois Fleur de Passion Blanc de Blancs 96

Marvelously exotic, the Fleur de Passion bottling is an exemplary and very consistent prestige cuvée from grower-producer Diebolt-Vallois. The 1996 shows its exotic character in full, with notes of ripe tropical fruits, white flowers, candied citrus and a ripe, honeyed minerality on the palate. A memorable wine that will age for decades to come.

### Louis Roederer Cristal 95

This wine is beginning to mature with notes of ripe, almost tropical fruit and toasted brioche, mixed with more youthful flavors of almond, apple and flaky pastry. The texture is luxuriously rich but surprisingly solid and very long on the finish. Drinking very well now, it still shows promise of future development.

### Salon Le Mesnil Blanc de Blancs 95

Slowly beginning to open up, this is a wine with enormous potential, with hints of lemon peel, mineral, marzipan and smoke. Crisply refreshing but not tart, it has all the energy of youth and the potential to age for decades. Superb.

### Jacques Selosse Extra Brut 95

The vintage wine from Selosse is a consistent high point, and the 1996 is one of many lofty peaks in his production. With developing aromas, from ripe, honeyed apricot to ground coffee, truffle and toast, it still shows great vigor with firm acidity, plenty of mousse and wonderful length.

### Moët & Chandon Dom Pérignon 94

The original release of the Dom Pérignon 1996 tastes superb now. The bright lemony/floral fruit has softened into a richer, more tropical note and the nascent creamy, yeasty aromas have come to the fore. It is still mineral and vivacious, and now more complex. (The late release P2 is the same wine, but with more time on the lees it has retained greater freshness and developed additional ground-coffee notes of complexity, as well as a little more volume on the palate.)

### Moët & Chandon Dom Pérignon Rosé 94

Mulberry and cassis fruit colored with baking spice and orange peel can be discerned as this wine develops. The texture is plump, substantial and beginning to round out. With its impressive density and length, it should continue to age for years.

### Louis Roederer Cristal Rosé 94

Lush and forward with dense mulberry aromas and a hint of marzipan, this wine is beginning to suggest more mature notes of truffle and caramel. Supple and velvety, it shows substantial concentration and vinosity, with a wonderfully long finish.

### Philipponnat Clos des Goisses 94

An impressive wine, with an aroma of lightly caramelized apples, buttered toast and rich overtones of mineral, smoke, toasted almond and fresh flowers. Rich and soft, it retains an elegant balance and a lingering finish.

### Pol Roger Sir Winston Churchill 94

Starting to open up now, this shows an array of flavors that range from lemon peel to toast, truffle to honey. The mousse is still lively and the texture is firm and structured, although it is beginning to soften around the edges. Will age for decades.

### Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs 94

A very youthful Taittinger, showing notes of fresh white flowers and citrus peel on the attack, followed by green apple and a fresh, yeasty character. Demonstrating lovely acidity and balance, the supple texture continues straight through the subtle, lingering finish. It needs time, but will definitely be one of the greats.

### Krug Clos d'Ambonnay Blanc de Noirs 93

Initially the Clos d'Ambonnay was a bit of a disappointment – closed and lacking the depth or complexity of the Clos du Mesnil. With time it is beginning to open, with a solid core of roast nut, ripe apple and candied lemon. The structure is very firm but balanced by impressive extract. Built for the long haul.

### Dom Ruinart Blanc de Blancs 93

Lime peel, woodsmoke and ripe pears blossom from the glass with this engaging wine. Firm and well-structured, it is now beginning to show more of its full potential, with a richness and length that are truly impressive.

### Bruno Paillard Blanc de Blancs Late Disgorged 92

A deep color, verging on gold, this is definitely mature but at a very pleasant stage in its evolution, with notes of baked apple, a hint of caramel and a suggestion of earthy truffles. The mousse is still fairly vigorous, and the trademark acidity of the vintage is marked. This exotic Champagne fills the mouth and lingers mysteriously on the finish.

### Perrier-Jouët Belle Epoque 92

A real treat. This shows a wonderful complexity with potent aromas of passion fruit and mango and pleasant shadings of brioche, minerality and smoke. The structure is beginning to soften now, and the firm acidity of youth is mellowing into an agreeable, lingering finish. Will hold easily for years to come. ☞

## ALSO TASTED

Billecart-Salmon Cuvée Elisabeth Salmon Rosé	92
Billecart-Salmon Le Clos Saint-Hilaire	92
Bollinger La Grande Année	92
Tarlant Prestige	92
Charles Heidsieck Rosé	91
Henriot Cuvée des Enchanteleurs	91
Pierre Gimonnet Gastronom	91
Dom Ruinart Rosé	91
Veuve Clicquot La Grande Dame	91
André Beaufort Grand Cru	90
Pierre Gimonnet et Fils Special Club	90
Billecart-Salmon Grande Cuvée	89
Billecart-Salmon Cuvée Nicolas	89
François Billecart	
Fleury Père et Fils	88
Gaston Chiquet	88
Special Club Grand Cru	
Louis Roederer	88
Pierre Moncuit Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs	88
Bruno Paillard Nec Plus Ultra	88

*Reviewed by Charles Curtis MW. All wines are brut, unless otherwise stated*