

# A TOP END CHAMPAGNE TASTE ADVENTURE

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Visiting Champagne is always a treat. The treat this time is that I also had the family in tow, a celebratory long weekend of birthdays and anniversaries. This was to be their first wine tour and our first family holiday all together since childhood. What could go wrong?

I decided that the best way for my siblings to understand the magic of this effervescent drink was for us to take in the diversity of what the region has to offer. So we based ourselves in Epernay, the regions capital in a gite at the start of the Avenue de Champagne – a famous street lined with the HQ's of many leading champagne producers such as Moët et Chandon, Mercier and De Castellane. The trip was to include a visit to a small organic vineyard, several tours of the major well-known champagne houses and a private tasting organised by Yours Truly – TheGrapeWizard! But the highlight and the most anticipated was to the most admired producer in the industry, Billecart-Salmon in Mareuil-sur-Ay.

Maison Billecart-Salmon is a small-medium family-owned producer at the very top end and as you might imagine they are not

able to say yes to all of the huge number of visitor requests. So it was with excitement, anticipation and a sense of awe that, like an excited herd of young billy goats, trotted off on our last day.

Pulling up to the house we were not disappointed; an elegant building of tan coloured stones, luxurious yet understated. Jerome, our guide for the tour greeted us warmly. Elegantly dressed, with refined manners and a subtle gallic dry humour he had us all transfixed.

History was made 200 years ago, in 1818, when Nicolas François Billecart and Elisabeth Salmon who owned a vineyard were married, marking the creation of their Champagne House. Ever since, through seven generations, each member of the family has stayed faithful to the motto: “Give priority to quality, strive for excellence”.

Our tour started outside at the esteemed 1 hectare vineyard Clos Saint Hilaire (which is about the size of Twickenham's rugby field). A Clos is a parcel of vines enclosed by a wall on 3 sides. Whilst grapes of different vintages and vineyards are blended, a Clos Champagne is made from the grapes from a

single parcel of land. There are only around 20 Clos in the Champagne region and since one vine produces only around 5 bottles of wine you understand the cost of this most rare of vintages. The vines, soil and subsoil are farmed biodynamically with the use of draft horses and even grazing sheep to keep the weeds down! The Clos Saint-Hilaire creates an exceptional champagne exclusively from Pinot Noir on limited release of between 3,500 to 7,500 individually numbered bottles and only in vintage years.

The champagnes of Maison Billecart-Salmon are created thanks to the knowledge of the men who rigorously cultivate an estate of 100 hectares, across 40 crus of the Champagne region combined with a complex and thorough blending process supervised by the elderly head of the family Monsieur Antoine Roland-Billecart. The majority of the grapes used for vinification come from a radius of 20km around Epernay, where the Grand Crus of Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay co-exist, in the ethereal vineyards of the Montagne de Reims, the Vallée de la Marne and the Côte des Blancs.



### The Cuverie

As part of the ever present quest to raise the quality of their champagnes, in the Fifties, the House were the first to use the technique of cold settling (normally used in the brewing industry) combined with the use of stainless steel tanks for a longer fermentation at a lower temperature. The vinification is carried out cru by cru, grape variety by grape variety which allows for conservation of the full range of characteristics of the terroir to be captured. The low temperature encourages the most delicate of aromas and allows all the purity of the fruit to be expressed. The elegance produced is the absolute signature of the Billicart-Salmon style.

Next on the tour was a visit to the Chais (wineries) one of which is a brand new state-of-the-art room built to celebrate Billicart's bicentenary. They house 400 small and 24 gigantic oak casks where the wine is vinified in oak to reveal all its richness and aromatic complexity to create their latest cuvee "Sous Bois".

The bottled wine then makes its way down to the chalk cellars which date from 17th and 19th centuries. Over three to four years, the non-vintage champagnes really blossom, staying around twice as long as the fixed regulations of the appellation. The vintage cuvées patiently wait ten years before they begin to reveal their maturity. Thus allowing time to play its role is behind the grandeur of Billicart-Salmon champagnes.

And time now to savour the results. It did not disappoint, so here are my tasting notes.

### Billicart-Salmon Cuvee Elizabeth Brut Rose 2007

A salmon pink appearance with a whiff of red berries, citrus peel and stone fruits. Some would say fresh figs, white peach, almond macarons. A delight!

On the mouth a mixture of nectarine and cardamom – exposing the elegance of a tangy mandarin together with delicate flavours of cedar and exotic wood.

Pair with creamy poultry, langoustines and /or crunchy hibiscus macarons.

Serve at: 11-12°C

GW Rating 5/5

### Billicart-Salmon Cuvee Louis Brut Blanc de Blanc 2006

APPEARANCE : golden yellow hue and a few green glints of youth.

PALATE : Beautifully refreshing, flavours of citron zest, peach and white pepper.

AROMA: Whipped cream, white flowers and citrus fruits.

Pair matches such as turbot or a creamy shellfish risotto.

Serve at: 11-12°C

GW Rating 5/5

### Billicart-Salmon Cuvee Nicolas Francois Brut 2006

APPEARANCE : yellow gold veiled in luminous golden reflections.

PALATE : honeyed notes associated with stone fruits with aromas of citrus zest.

AROMA: preserved peaches, fine apple tart and lemon verbena tea

Pair with roasted poultry or a turbot in a creamy sauce.

Serve at: 11-12°C

GW Rating 5/5

### Billicart-Salmon Extra Brut

APPEARANCE : A pale gold intensity.

PALATE : Biscuity flavor with notes of white flesh fruits.

AROMA : Dried fruits and brioche combined with floral notes. Subtle notes of lemon verbena.

TASTING: Pair with prawns, grilled scallops and ceviche.

GW Rating 4/5

If you want to learn more about Billicart-Salmon, catching up with an interview with Mathieu Roland-Billicart, the current CEO and the Chef de Caves then please go over to my website. [AC](#)

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