

Maison Lilbert-Fils

Cramant (Côte des Blancs)



"But the one thing you pretty much cannot get out of [most] non-vintage Blanc de Blancs Champagne is true Brut dryness and the level of sophistication at which fruit and yeast are augmented by an equally prominent minerality. This wine [Lilbert NV] shows remarkably intricate aromas and flavors, and it has shown them every time I have ever tasted it."

Michael Franz, choosing his top NV Champagne in winereviewonline.com (December '05)



Since 1746 the Lilbert family has been making Champagne in the hilltop village of Cramant. This tiny artisan house makes only grand cru *blanc de blancs* from 100% Chardonnay and averages 2,250 cases each year. To put this in perspective, the house of Moët & Chandon pumps out 25 million cases each year. Quite unlike Moët, the Lilberts use only grapes from their own vineyards—9.4 acres divided among 14 parcels in the grand cru villages of Oiry, Chouilly, and Cramant on the *Côte des Blancs*. The majority of their acreage is in

Cramant. (Note: Cramant should not be confused with *crémant*. A term once used for a style, *crémant* now legally refers to all *méthode Champenoise* wine made outside of the Champagne appellation.)

The Côte des Blancs is a ridge that begins just outside of Epernay and runs north-south. Vineyards grow on its east-facing escarpment, making the resemblance to Burgundy's *Côte d'Or* a rich parallel (although here the soil is white chalk and the ridgeline is much shorter). Young Bertrand Lilbert began working with his father in the 1990s and made one change. The village of Cramant has long had one of the truly great *terroirs* of the *Côte des Blancs*. Why not, he thought, honor this tradition? Thus he made the 1995 vintage Champagne from 100% Cramant fruit, saving the fruit from the other village parcels for the non-vintage wine. The result was superb, and he has made the practice standard.

Michel Bettane, France's top critic, names Maison Lilbert-Fils as the reference point for Cramant. The Wine Spectator (11/15/02 issue) and The Wine Advocate (issue 144) both agreed on the proper rating for Lilbert's vintage 1995 Champagne: 93 points. The Wine Advocate went on to rate the 1997 at 92 points and the 1999 at 93 points.

The non-vintage and vintage Champagnes have pin-point bubbles and intense aromas of lime, green apple, hay, and dried apricot. These are beautiful expressions of minerally Chardonnay, with elegance, subtlety, and gorgeous fruit that is not dressed up by excessively sweet dosages (5-15 grams of sugar is the range for brut, but *chez* Lilbert stays within 6-8g and their Champagne's pressure is lower than the norm). As Andrew Jefford observes in his book, *The New France*, "This tiny 4-ha Cramant domaine is the source of some very fine and long-lived Blanc de Blancs made by Georges Lilbert and his son Bertrand. The style is less soft, creamy, and flowery than the Blanc de Blancs of most large houses might leave the drinker expecting: Cramant here has a taut, steely, rigorous quality..."