

Champagne Lilbert-Fils, Côte des Blancs



The written record has the Lilbert family cultivating vines around its hilltop village of Cramant in 1746, and it's probably a fair bet that they were there sometime before that (the oldest part of their 23-foot-deep cellar dates from 1712). The record further shows that as early as 1907 the family bottled its own wine for commercial sale. Despite such longevity, the house of Lilbert is tiny: it farms a mere 3.5 hectares of vines (this figure translates into 8.6 acres, and unfortunately our old back label erroneously states 9.4 acres).

Bertrand Lilbert and his father Georges make only grand cru blanc de blancs from 100% Chardonnay. Their annual production averages 2,200 twelve-pack cases. To put this in perspective, the house of Moët & Chandon pumps out 25 million cases each year. Unlike Moët, the Lilberts make all of their wine from their own vineyards, which break down into 15 parcels in the grand cru villages of Oiry (10% of their total plantation), Chouilly (30%), and Cramant (60%) on the Côte des Blancs. (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 within France.)

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

The farming culture here is *lutte raisonnée*, ie sustainable. All of the wines are made in steel vats and all undergo malolactic fermentation. The bottles are riddled by hand in a deep, hand-dug chalk cellar, and the wine is disgorged without freezing. The house style emphasizes fine mousse and intense aromas of lime, green apple, hay, and dried apricot. These are beautiful expressions of often intensely mineral Chardonnay, with elegance, subtlety, and gorgeous fruit that is not dressed up by overtly sweet dosages. 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...."

<http://www.champagne-lilbert.com/>