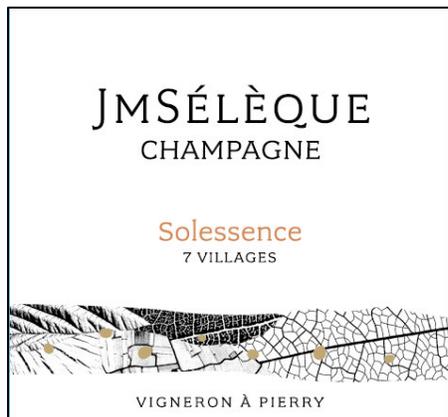


Champagne J-M Sélèque Pierry



Jean-Marc Sélèque is one of the brightest young stars in Champagne!

—John Gilman, *A View from the Cellar*, issue 69, July 2017



Jean-Marc Sélèque (*say-lek*) returned to Pierry in 2008 after internships at Chandon’s facilities in Napa Valley and in Australia’s Yarra Valley with a vision of what he wanted to do and didn’t want to do at Champagne JM Sélèque. The latter was reinforced by his experiences at those two large production operations, where vineyard practices resulted in all manner of “corrections” having to be made in the cellar. The positive ideas were simple, but labor intensive: in the vines, plowing of rows by tractor or horse; control of yields by careful pruning; organic and biodynamic applications to boost the health of soil and vine.

In the cellar, he moved to much slower and more gentle fermentations, something he considers key for flavor and texture. He did this by lowering the temperature and working more with wild yeast (a lot of his fermentations are wild, but he’s not orthodox about that). He instituted longer ageing on the lees for all the cuvées, both in barrel or tank and subsequently in bottle for the secondary fermentation (that bottling is now done in July following the harvest, which is a long and relaxed period of time for young wine to come together). He did away with fining, and now only minimally filters certain large lots (the wines raised in barrel are not normally filtered, and what is filtered amounts to roughly 25% of the total production). Finally, because his farming reforms resulted in better maturity in his grapes, he lowered the level of sugar in the final dosage. The dosage and other specifics are admirably detailed on Jean-Marc’s back labels.

Fundamentally, these ideas evolved from friendships with fellow reform-minded growers, who insisted that the road to authenticity would only be found by working closely with one’s vines, rather than from his enological studies. Currently, Champagne is arguably the most dynamic wine region in France—a country where almost nothing viticulturally is standing still anymore—and it would be accurate to view Jean-Marc at the vanguard of this shift toward more artisanal farming and production. What may be most impressive, however, is how he has implemented his ideas with such openness and quiet confidence. He has taken the counsel of a who’s who list of cutting edge growers in Champagne, befriended many of them, and he makes a habit of visiting their ilk in the Loire Valley and in Burgundy. Likewise, he routinely receives fellow growers to his domain.

The domain began in 1965, when Jean-Marc's grandfather started planting vines with the aid of his father-in-law (then the president of the Pierry co-op). Subsequently Jean-Marc's father joined the domain in 1974 after acquiring a degree in enology, and he did much to update the winery and augment its vineyard holdings.

When Jean-Marc came on board in 2008, he turned the domain toward the organic viticulture he envisioned. In 2010, he started working biodynamically, and now nearly four of his 7.5 hectares (19 acres) are farmed accordingly, a fact that he doesn't make much fuss about because for him it's not about the label so much as it is about making better wine. (He has not gone for certification because he doesn't want to be straitjacketed into using copper sulfites when, under certain conditions, a synthetic fungicide might be more benign.) Separately, he stopped his father's practice of selling some grapes to *négociants*, and he began to acquire more oak vessels for fermentation and ageing on the lees. Today the ratio of steel to oak in the cellar is roughly 60/40. He has been selling off his 228-liter barrels of late in favor of 350 and 600-liter barrels for fermentation and barrel aging. For certain younger vineyard parcels, he uses 20-hectoliter *foudres*, plus he's experimenting with amphora, a cigar barrel (so-called because of its elongated shape), and a concrete egg. Steel is used mainly for the younger, fruitier Solesence.

These days, the grapes are decidedly in better health and are harvested with lower pHs and higher acidities (one result of healthier soils and deeper roots). As a result, beginning in 2011 Jean-Marc stopped the practice of introducing malolactic fermentation in barrel. Given the low pH, which greatly inhibits malo, this was easily done. Thus, increasingly, some wines have no ML, while some have a part, and some continue to have the ML completely realized.

The domain has 19 acres of vines which grow in 45 parcels and lie across 7 different villages. The average vine age is a notable 40 years of age (positively wizened by Champagne standards!) Most of the vines grow in the communes of Pierry and then Moussy, followed by Epernay, Mardeuil, Dizy, Vertus, and Boursault. About 53% of the vines are Chardonnay; 40% are Meunier; and about 7% are Pinot Noir. Total annual production is around 5,400 cases.

Pierry, with Moussy, is in *Les Côteaux Sud d'Epernay*, a zone delimited in 1996 and located just south and southwest of Epernay. It's a small, branching valley with thirteen villages tucked between the Marne Valley to the north and the Côtes des Blancs to the east. The Côtes des Blancs is known, of course, for Chardonnay; Aÿ, to the northeast in the Marne, is known for Pinot Noir; and Mardeuil, to the northwest in the Marne, is known for Pinot Meunier. The Côteaux Sud has all three varieties, with Chardonnay predominating, followed closely by Meunier, and then Pinot Noir. Expositions are to the south and southeast, promoting the possibility of good maturity in the grapes, but the valley hillsides fold and twist and give considerable diversity. Then there's the soil: the chalk here is less dense than on the Côte des Blancs, and it usually has two to three feet of clay topsoil mixed with varying amounts of limestone, schist, flint and marl. The result is Chardonnay that tends to be fuller, softer, and fruitier than that from the Côtes des Blancs, thanks to the clay (but still mineral, thanks to the chalk); Meunier that is ripe yet more elegant and more mineral than that from Mardeuil; and Pinot Noir that veers from fine to full, depending on the site.

Today Jean-Marc divides his Champagnes into three ranges. First comes the Solessence range for the base level blends, with the lot number on the back referencing the base vintage. "Solessence" refers to the essence of soil, and there's a brut, a brut nature, and a rosé. Next comes the vintage-dated Soliste range: a range dedicated to unique terroirs. Each wine comes from one site, one grape, and one vintage. The third tier is made of two proprietarily-named wines: Quintette and Partition. Quintette is Jean-Marc's Blanc de Blancs, a Chardonnay from five mature sites. Up to 2014, this was effectively a vintage wine (see lot number), while starting with 2014 the wine will have 20-30% reserve wine from a solera aging in *foudre*; thus the lot number will then refer to the base vintage. Partition is Jean-Marc's one blended vintage wine.

In 2015, just in time for the harvest, Jean-Marc moved to a brand new cellar on the outskirts of Pierry. The cellar was designed to allow him to transfer wine via gravity, and it has much more room than his previous digs, which in turn allowed him to buy more containers of various sizes, be they steel or wood or concrete, to do specific fermentations of small lots of grapes. And this cellar gave him the opportunity to invest in a new press designed specifically for sparkling wine production and considered by many to be the finest available. It's a Coquard press, a *pressoir automatique à plateau incliné*, or PAI. It does the same job as the widely used and much respected traditional vertical press, but more efficiently and with far less exposure to oxygen. Thus in 2015 Jean-Marc was able to lower his additions of SO₂ during the pressing and fermentations by a full 25% compared to 2014 (and this is a man who has always used the least possible amounts of SO₂). Going forward, total SO₂ in the Sélèque wines is 20-30 mg/l.

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