

# Champagne JM 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

*One of Champagne's most exciting and dynamic young producers, Jean-Marc Sélèque is based in Pierry in the Coteaux Sud d'Epernay.... As his viticultural progress bears dividends, these wines go from strength to strength and I find myself more and more impressed with every passing release. Pierry enjoyed considerable historical celebrity, and thanks to Sélèque, it seems more than likely to regain it.*

—William Kelley, The Wine Advocate, September 2021

*Il faut déjà vinifier un vin avant de vinifier un champagne.*

—Jean-Marc Sélèque in 2023



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, shallow plowing of rows by horse or tractor for weed control; reducing 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. Initially, many but not all of his ferments were wild, and he wasn't orthodox about that. By 2018, however, he had isolated one strain of yeast from one of his wild ferments, and these days before each harvest he makes a *pied de cuve* over a seven-day period. 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 at the end of July following the harvest, which is a long and relaxed *élevage*, allowing a young wine to come together). Early on, he stopped his father's systematic introduction of malolactic fermentation, letting the wine decide, but now the bacteria is well present in his cellar and the ML happens naturally to all the wines. He did away with fining and worked up to completely doing away with filtration in 2015, when his new cellar gave him the measure of control he needed. That same year introduced a high-tech press with temperature control; in 2017, he outfitted his harvest truck with temperature control; and in 2021, with climate change on the rise, he added temperature controls to his tanks in the underground cellar. Finally, because his farming reforms resulted in better maturity in his grapes, he lowered the level of sugar in the final dosage. Dosage and other specifics are spelled out on his 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 domaine.

The domaine 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 domaine 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 domaine toward the organic viticulture he envisioned. In 2010, he started working biodynamically, and now all of his parcels are farmed organically and receive some biodynamic preparations, 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 oak to steel in the cellar is roughly 60/40, with the steel tanks being used primarily for the younger, fruitier Solessence and Solessence Rosé. He is, however, moving more toward oak every vintage. Since 2015, he's been selling off his 228-liter barrels in favor of 350 and 600-liter barrels for fermentation and barrel aging. He buys barrels from over a half dozen top coopers, and typically the percentage of new oak for a given élevage is 5-10%. For certain younger vineyard parcels, he uses 20-hectoliter foudres, plus he's experimenting with amphora and cigar barrels of various sizes (so-called because of their elongated shape). He's played with a concrete egg but that vessel hasn't impressed him.

The domaine has 22 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. Some 50% of the vines are Chardonnay; 40% are Pinot Meunier; and 10% are Pinot Noir.

Those 22 acres supported an average production of 5,500 cases per year. In 2018 Jean-Marc traded in his RM license for a Négociant-Manipulant license so that he could buy grapes from like-minded growers. There are four such organic growers, all farming in one or more of the seven villages where Jean-Marc has vines. Jean-Marc chooses the parcels, and his team does the harvesting for the one grower who sells him the most fruit. All of these grapes go into the Solessence range, enabling Jean-Marc to devote more of his estate fruit to his top cuvées. Today, the domaine's production averages 9,500 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 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 ((Epernay and Pierry have the most significant plantings of 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 (although mid-slope in Pierry the topsoil is only 8-12 inches above the chalk, and it's worth noting that Pierry has seven distinct soil types). 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. The vineyards in the Côteaux Sud represent 4% of the total in Champagne

Historically, Pierry was as noted as Dom Perignon's village of Hautvillers was back in the Dom's day. This was because of a younger contemporary Benedictine monk, one Brother Oudart, who farmed in Pierry and made his own contributions to the making of Champagne (it was he who standardized the key step of *liqueur de tirage*).

Today Jean-Marc divides his Champagnes into three ranges. First comes the Solescence range for the base level blends, with the lot number on the back referencing the base vintage. "Solescence" refers to the essence of soil, and there's an extra brut, an extra brut rosé, and a brut nature. Next comes the vintage dated Soliste range: a range that since vintage 2015 is dedicated to unique terroirs within Jean-Marc's commune of Pierry. Each wine comes from one site, one grape, and one vintage. The third tier is made of two proprietary-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 SO<sub>2</sub> 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 SO<sub>2</sub>). Going forward, total SO<sub>2</sub> in the Sélèque wines is 20-30 mg/l. By the way, in 2023 he got himself a machine to cook up his own sulfur. He says it's really interesting how the homemade stuff has less of an impact on the taste of the wine. So far, he hasn't blown himself up.

[www.champagne-seleque.fr/en/](http://www.champagne-seleque.fr/en/)