



A meeting with Jean-Marc Sélèque

From the southern slopes of Épernay, he constantly strives to express as accurately as possible all the richness of the terroir of Pierry and its surroundings, through vintages of single-plot champagne or blends and, more recently, Côteaux Champenois.

You represent the 3rd generation at the head of the family estate. What is your heritage?

If my grandmother already came from a long line of winegrowers, my grandfather was indeed the first Seleque to launch the activity under our name. That said, let's be frank, he worked more in mixed crops: milk, cereals, a little livestock and, at the margin, vines. Because, at that time, winegrowers were having difficulty making ends meet. We, too, often forget that it was not until the 1970s that champagne began to enjoy some success. In fact, it was my father who was fully in charge, independently and not in a coop.



So your vocation comes from him?

Yes, in a way... It was he who inaugurated our champagne production company, thus managing from A to Z all the stages necessary for the production of wine. When I started, I just changed direction. He experienced the great era of synthetic products which made life easier for everyone and champagne purchased mainly by individuals - unlike today--therefore a very general public. Building on my various early experiences, I aspired to produce more committed, more identity-based wines.

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Precisely, before joining the family estate, you explored the New World. What lessons did you learn from it?

First of all, it's my B.T.S. in Bordeaux which opened my eyes. There, I was able to discover wines other than champagne. It is also the characteristic of this new generation of Champagne winegrowers to open up to other cultures, methods, regions and even countries. For my part, although I did not yet have any convictions, I very quickly noticed that the elders had sometimes taught me somewhat erroneous things. They thought they had mastered their subject, when some questioning was necessary. From this point of view, going abroad did not necessarily introduce me to new techniques, since I increased the number of internships in large companies with industrialized processes, like Chandon. On the other hand, it allowed me to further clarify my DNA: no standards, no marketed "products". In 2008, upon my return to Pierry, I went to meet people like Agrapart, Selosse, Rodez, Lahaye ...and, right next to me, Aurélien Laherte. He was further ahead of me. He is older. He had already changed quite a bit. We joined hands to evolve together. This is one of the other assets of this new generation: in addition to its open-mindedness, it shares much more than our ancestors.

The correct expression of terroir is at the heart of your approach. In this quest, the southern slopes of Épernay and the village of Pierry in particular offer a wonderful playground, right?

This terroir is not as recognized as it should be. It's a shame. However, in the 17th century, Brother Oudart, head of the Maison de Pierry, contributed with the help of Dom Pérignon, in the field, to the mastery of the Champagne method to the point of being able to sell his production at a high price--proof that the region's wines were renowned. Some large houses have not made a mistake, like Taittinger and Deutz for example, but use a brand approach more than a terroir approach. For me, I wanted to rework the plots, to show the richness of our land. At the crossroads between the Marne valley and the Côte des Blancs, in the middle of the break of the Épernay basin, our parcels bring together clay, chalk, sand, marl and, above all, these typical millstones. And then, the southern slopes of Épernay are not limited to Pierry. There is also Chavot, Moussy, Vinay, Vaudancourt... That is to say, 13 villages with a little Pinot Noir and mainly Pinot Meunier, all replete with elegance and freshness, and Chardonnays, more generous than in the Côte des Blancs, with quite a bit of structure and chew, especially mid-slope.



In the vineyard, what does your approach involve?

We have 45 parcels, and we try to adapt to each one at their own pace. Year after year, we get to know them, to understand their “personality”. In short, almost 45 different viticultures are set up. Applying one and the same method everywhere would make no sense. Some islets are more exposed, others have lower water retention capacities. And, with climate change, these differences are accentuated. However, we are not able to invest in all our plots in the same way. Priority therefore is given to our favorite terroir which is Pierry. Without forgetting the vines acquired in Vertus or those on the eastern slopes of Épernay--enough to nourish our great vintage champagnes, Quintette and Partition. All this, provided you harvest when ripe of course. I hadn't necessarily learned that when I started. There is even a tendency in Champagne to chase acidity. However, on closer inspection, the greatest vintages recorded have been the ripest. In fact, we favor a certain maturity. Before, the village winegrowers finished harvesting when we started. It caused a lot of discussion. Now they don't question it.

And in the cellar? You talk about respecting a slow tempo.

Compared to traditional Champagne practices, we actually tend to take more time. Especially before bottling. Contrary to popular belief, I do not believe that champagne is mainly made in its glass container. This is only part of the equation. You have to vinify a wine before vinifying a champagne. At the estate, we therefore work instead on natural aging and decanting processes, in order to give the wine time to work. When my father used filtration and cold periods to bottle in February after the harvest, that was an approach that was more economical than sensitive. We age our champagnes for a little over 10 months in barrels and vats, on lees, without filtration, with only racking. In the bottle, we also try to extend the aging thanks to new cellars allowing us to store more and facilitate this effort.

The Soliste range dedicated to a plot/a grape variety perfectly expresses your approach. So, how do you deal with your other champagnes made from blends? The approach is different.

Champagne rhymes with pleasure and sharing. Making only single-plot wines and therefore, in a sense, “cerebral” wines, would not lend itself to all tasting moments. Solescence represents, in this perspective, the champagne par excellence, the one to bring everywhere, including to friends who are not connoisseurs. And then, these vintages are not necessarily the easiest to make. They require a consistent approach across the entire vineyard and estate. No, doing good on a certain volume, while respecting our identity and a certain universality, at a relatively accessible price, obviously remains complicated.



Another manifestation of your concern for expressing the terroir is the production of three vintages from the Côteaux Champenois. What made you decide to do this? Why this step aside?

My wife always tells me that we don't drink enough champagne at home! It's true, I drink a lot of wines from regions other than ours. Since 2015, I have especially pleased myself by developing these cuvées and thus opening my mind. I'm testing. First, it was the pressing, typically Champagne; then, old grape varieties like Petit Meslier; then, small macerations; now, the size to have different concentrations. These Côteaux Champenois help me understand how to go further in a fair expression of our terroir. Of course, the work required and the key stages differ, but this gives some food for thought.

To end on a lighter note, where does this passion for musical vintage names come from?

We are all a bit musical in the family. My grandfather sang a lot. When I was younger, my father played in an orchestra. I played the piano and then the guitar. My children got into music. It helps us develop our sensitivity. And, in wine, you need it to find your way.

