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INDEPENDENT WINE MERCHANTS

Established 1780

Champagne Salon Press Coverage

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Producer profile

Champagne Salon

It's rarer and pricier than even Cristal or Dom Pérignon, yet many haven't even heard of Salon, the ultimate 'insider's Champagne'. James Lawther MW looks at why flying under the radar has worked in the house's favour, and uncovers its more affordable (but equally discreet) sibling Delamotte

IT WAS ON my usual beat, in Bordeaux, that I was first introduced to Champagne Salon. A generous producer served me a glass of the outstanding 1996. Its length, vitality and precision aroused my curiosity and I resolved to discover more.

'Discreet' and 'confidential' are the adjectives that best describe Salon and its sister house Delamotte. Both are part of the Laurent-Perrier group but their low-key disposition imparts an autonomous, independent air. Salon is clearly a rarity – the price beyond that even of Cristal and Dom Pérignon, and production limited to about 50,000 bottles... when the wine is actually made. The style is a mix of vigour and finesse with an affirmed minerality and, thanks to a rapier-like acidity, it has considerable potential to age. From Le Mesnil-sur-Oger in the heart of the Côte des Blancs, Chardonnay is Salon's speciality, in particular the unique, single-cuvée, vintage-only Blanc de Blancs.

Salon: exclusive and elusive

Guardian of the temple for the past 14 years, and my host for a visit to Champagne, is the ebullient managing director of Salon and Delamotte, Didier Depond. Salon, he recounts, was the creation of Eugène-Aimé Salon, a native of Champagne who, in a rags-to-riches tale, made a fortune as a furrier in Paris at the turn of the 19th century. He dreamt of making his own Champagne and, aided by his brother-in-law,

Right: Champagne's secret sisters. Salon and Delamotte, have adopted a low-key approach



'The insider's tip: in the two years out of three when Salon is not produced, its prized Le Mesnil grapes are integrated into the Delamotte'

a cellar master, he bought a hectare plot in Le Mesnil and made the first known vintage of Salon in 1905.

The concept of Salon was innovative from the outset and flew against the generally held view that Champagne was a blended wine. The guidelines, which remain the same today, stipulate grapes from a single terroir (Le Mesnil), one variety (Chardonnay), only vintage offerings – and only when the vintage is considered exceptional – and, finally, ageing for a minimum of 10 years in bottle before release.

Initially a wine for Eugène-Aimé Salon's personal delectation, Salon was eventually commercialised, becoming the house champagne at the famous Parisian restaurant Maxim's in the 1920s and 1930s.

Including the 1905 and the 1999 (to be released on 9 March 2011, *see box p52*) only 37 vintages of Salon have been produced over a period of 100 years. The source for the wine continues to be the original one hectare plot, Le Jardin Salon, as well as 19 other parcels owned by growers under contract, in all a total of 10 hectares. 'The vines, which have an average age of 35 years, are all ideally located on the mid-slope in Le Mesnil. The topsoil is thin and the rooting system in the chalk deep, which accounts for the minerality,' explains Depond.

Salon and Delamotte at a glance

Salon

Annual production

50,000 bottles (if made)

Wines

One – a vintage blanc de blancs, made only in top vintages, on average once every three years

Vineyard

Mainly a 1ha plot in Le Mesnil-sur-Oger, plus 19 other contracted sites

Price £200 per bottle

Delamotte

Annual production

750,000 bottles

Wines Brut NV (60% of the production), rosé NV, blanc de blancs NV and blanc de blancs vintage

Vineyard

When Salon is not made, the brut and blancs de blancs come from Salon's Le Mesnil plot; otherwise, as with the other wines, various grand crus in Oger, Avize, Cremant, Bouzy, Ambonnay and Tours-sur-Marne

Price From £25–£50





'The prerequisite for a Salon vintage is perfect balance between sugar and acidity'

- Didier Depond

Salon was purchased by Laurent-Perrier in 1988 and seems to benefit from the group infrastructure. The grapes are pressed in a facility at Oger and the wine then produced at Laurent-Perrier's cellars at Tours-sur-Marne (only stainless steel tanks are used for the vinification) before being sent to the Salon cellars in Le Mesnil for the second fermentation and ageing. Future vintages in the pipeline include 2002, 2004, 2006 and 2008 (potentially the greatest vintage ever, according to Depond). 'The prerequisite for a Salon vintage is perfect balance between sugar and acidity,' he explains.

Delamotte: unpretentious and improving

Sister house Delamotte is not in the same 'super-cuvée' league as Salon but is the older of the two by a clear margin, having been founded in 1760, by François Delamotte. While Salon was acquiring a reputation in the early 20th century, Delamotte lingered in obscurity as an annex of Champagne Lanson. In 1938 a change of hands occurred: the house was bought by Marie-Louise de Nonancourt. In 1988, along with Salon, it was fully integrated into the Laurent-Perrier group under the direction of Marie-Louise's son, Bernard, who died, aged 90, last year. The progress in quality has been heartening.

Delamotte produces a limited range of four Champagnes, a non-vintage brut and rosé and a non-vintage and vintage blanc de blancs. The grapes are sourced from top grands crus vineyards: the Chardonnay from Le Mesnil-sur-Oger, Oger, Avize and occasionally Cramant; while the Pinot Noir comes from Bouzy, Ambonnay and Tours-sur-Marne. In years when Salon is not produced, its prized Le Mesnil grapes are integrated into the Delamotte brut and blancs de blancs. Vinification takes place at the Laurent-Perrier facilities, with stainless steel used to reinforce the crisp, clean expression.

The non-vintage brut accounts for 60% of the house's annual production of 750,000 bottles. It's an

Sibling revelry: a tasting of Salon & Delamotte

As well as the vintage of Salon currently on release, the 1997, I also had the chance to taste two other vintages at either end of the spectrum. These were the 1999, to be released on 9 March 2011 (disgorged an hour before the tasting and without any *dosage*), and the 1988. The 1999 appeared rich and powerful but stern. A substantial wine with marked minerality, it has long-term potential. The 1988 shows the complexity Salon acquires with age: the nose was fresh and precise and the palate full and intense.

Salon 1988 ★★★★★ 18.5pts/20
POA **Corney & Barrow**
Pale gold hue. Light bead. Hazelnut, apple and Sherry notes on the nose but still fresh and precise. Sherry notes on the palate are even more marked – has the nuance of a fine Manzanilla. Good acidity and volume, the finish dry and slightly saline. Astonishing. **Drink:** 2011

Salon 1999 ★★★★★ 18
POA **Corney & Barrow**
Pale straw hue with fine bead. Intense nose. Marked vinosity, almost as if there was some Pinot Noir in the blend. Palate a touch austere. Mineral and apple notes. Enormous weight and depth but tightly wound. Long, powerful finish. **Drink:** 2012–2022



Salon 1997 ★★★★★ 18
£195–£270 **Corney & Barrow, Fortnum & Mason, Harrods, Harvey Nichols**
A fine, elegant wine with depth and intensity. More feminine in style than the

1996 or 1999. Persistent, delicate bead, the nose fresh, pure and constant with floral, citrus notes. Linear, long and well-defined. **Drink:** 2011–2020

Delamotte, Blanc de Blancs 1999
★★★★ 17
£40 **Corney & Barrow**
Pale straw colour with fine bead. A ripe year, the nose presenting soft fruit and honeyed, buttery notes. Round, rich and full on the palate but with a long, clean, fresh finish. **Drink:** 2011–2014



Delamotte, Blanc de Blancs NV ★★★★★ 16.5
£35–£42 **Corney & Barrow, Harvey Nichols**
Non-vintage but with a predominance of 2004 in the blend. Four years' ageing. Cool, fresh and precise. Like delicate porcelain in structure and form. Fine line and length. **Drink:** 2011

Delamotte, Brut NV ★★★ 15.5
£26 **Corney & Barrow**
Fine, delicate bead. Emphasis on the fruit. Ripe pear on the nose. Palate round and tender. A citrus-fresh finish. **Drink:** 2011



Delamotte, Brut Rosé NV
★★★ 15
£40 **Corney & Barrow**
Pale salmon pink colour. Strawberry, red fruit notes on the nose. Palate fresh, fruity and unpretentious. Enjoyable young. **Drink:** 2011

For full details of UK stockists, see p95

amiable, unpretentious Champagne produced from 50% Chardonnay, 30% Pinot Noir and 20% Pinot Meunier. The tiny volume of rosé is made from 80% Pinot Noir and 20% Chardonnay, the two fermented together and the colour extracted by a short maceration on the skins. But the house forte is the blancs de blancs – the non-vintage elegant and poised, the quintessential aperitif; the vintage richer and more complex following seven years' ageing.

The chance to taste Salon requires a deep pocket (or magnanimous friends) and a special occasion, but the experience is memorable. The insider's tip: if you appreciate good blanc de blancs and can't afford Salon, look for Delamotte – the wines are made from the finest grapes so there's serious value in terms of content, as well as price. **D**

James Lawther MW is a Decanter contributing editor who has lived and worked in France for the past 20 years

Photographs: Clay McLachlan/Cephas