



BNV (Brut Non-Vintage)

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



Spec's sells a lot of Champagne. In fact in the last rolling twelve months, we've sold 159,432 bottles of Champagne. Well over two thirds – 109,436 bottles of various shapes and sizes – of that was labeled Brut Non-Vintage. These numbers include only real Champagne from the legally delimited producing region of Champagne France; no bottled bubbly from California or Spain or Italy or even the rest of France is included. Brut Non-Vintage is far and away the best selling sort of Champagne but it is not what gets the most press. The wine press of late seems to be more focused on Rosé,

on Farmer Fizz, and on the fancier tête de cuvées or luxury blends (such as Dom Perignon, Le Grande Dame, P-J Flower Bottle, and Roederer Cristal). So what is Brut Non-Vintage and why is it so popular?

To start, you need a little background on Champagne. Champagne wasn't always the fizzy, usually dry wine we drink on festive occasions today. In Thomas Jefferson's time, Champagne was often a still (as in non-sparkling) wine. And the sparkling sort was generally labeled "Sec" (or dry in French) but by our standards today would have been considered a bit sweet. Over the years, the still wines of Champagne have all but disappeared (one of the few wine-related things Jefferson did not get spot-on – he preferred still Champagne.) Spec's sells a couple of still Champagnes and they are really excellent but it is only a very few bottles a year.

During the same time, the general public taste for sparkling Champagne (and that "sparkling" won't be mentioned again as it is now assumed that all Champagne is bubbly) has gotten notably drier – but there is a limit. Over time, Sec (1.7 to 3.5% residual sugar or "RS") gave way to the drier "Extra Dry" (1.2 to 2.0% RS) which in turn gave way to "Brut" (less than 1.5% RS). Notice that there is a zone of overlap so one producer's Extra Dry actually could be drier than another's Brut. For a time, there seemed to be an interest in even drier styles such as "Extra Brut" (less than 0.6% RS) and even Natural or Brut Nature (less than 0.3%RS). Notice that these driest two styles both fit into the "Brut Category" so they could be (but rarely are) labeled simply "Brut". These driest styles appear to be too dry for broad market acceptance and so occupy a sort of small niche (but much larger than that of still Champagne) in the much larger Champagne market. We like our Champagne dry but not too dry.

So all of that both leaves us with and explains a bit about Brut. What about the "Non Vintage" part? The vast majority of Champagne produced does not carry a vintage date. 86.75% (138,305 bottles) of all Champagne Spec's sells is labeled "Non-Vintage". Of course this includes a fair amount of Extra dry, Demi-Sec, Sec, and even Rosé but most of it is Brut Non-Vintage. So what is Non-Vintage? To be precise, Non-Vintage Champagne should be and maybe usually is a blend of wines from two or more years that ideally combine the freshness of some younger wines (the majority of the blend) with a smaller percentage of older "reserve wines" that should add richness and complexity while expressing a supposed house style. In practice, a goodly amount of Brut Non-Vintage (BNV) is actually the product of a single vintage - especially in the better years. Right now, most BNV in the market seems to be based on the 2005 and 2006 vintages. "Seems to be" because the Champagne producers are often a bit vague about their tech specs.

So why label it "Brut Non Vintage"? Because most of the Champagne houses large or small use their BNV as the foundation for their business and I find that, at least in the better producers (and certainly the ones that refrain from purchasing sur lattes - please see box), BNV can be the best expression of a house style. The Champenoise want the BNV to be as consistent as possible and to be the flag-bearing product that is always available in the market.

Just as all men are not created equal (although our legal and political systems work as well as they do because we try to act as if they were), neither is all BNV the same. Each house has its own style and blend and dosage and other quirks. Here's a list of some of the best BNV I have tasted of late. Within the realm of BNV, this is the good stuff. Hope you enjoy. I will be tasting and drinking several of these in the coming couple of weeks. Cheers.

Sur Latte is the economically expedient practice wherein a producer (usually a négociant) buys unfinished bottled Champagne from a grower or co-op or even another négociant and finishes (disgorges and add the dosage) the wine and sells it as if it had been made by the producer. Because of differences in grape variety, sourcing, terroir, and cellar practice, *sur latte* wines are very generic tasting. Several quality proponents in Champagne deplore the practice and several of the best négociants (Bollinger, Henriot, Taittinger, etc.) have "taken the pledge" not to buy *sur lattes*.

Most of the wines bought *sur latte* by the big Champagne houses are ultimately sold as Brut NV or Extra Dry. These wines tend to be easily accessible and can be commercial (in the best sense of the word) in style. Here's a tip: *If you want the best possible Brut Non-Vintage from a particular producer, buy it in magnums* as their magnums have to come from their own production.

LANCELOT ROYER Cuvee des Chevaliers Brut Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru, Champagne, NV 12x750ml \$47.99 \$540.36

Tech: 12% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay all from Grand Cru vineyards in Cramant in the Cote de Blancs. Straw in color, bright and clear and fully sparkling; dry, medium-bodied with crisp acidity. Fresh but ripe mixed citrus with a hint of tree fruit accented with chalky children's vitamins mineral terroir; long clean, fresh finish. This is a toasty, yeasty, focused, rich Champagne offering citrus and spice. Classic Chardonnay bubbles. Long and alive in the mouth. Excellent. Spec's Score: 94+.

LANCELOT ROYER Cuvee RR Brut Blanc de Blancs, Champagne, NV 12x750ml \$40.84 \$459.55

Tech: 13% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay from the estate's vineyards in and around Cramant in the Cote de Blancs. Straw in color, with green and yellow highlights. bright, clear and sparkling; dry, medium light-bodied with fresh acidity; very light phenolics. Offers citrusy fruit with chalky children's vitamins mineral notes; long refreshing clean finish. Fresh and yeasty; bright with citrusy fruit. Exactly as expected: toasty and delicious. Excellent. Spec's Score: 93.

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DEMOISELLE Brut "Tete de Cuvee", Champagne, NV

12x750ml \$39.89 \$449.16

This is Demoiselle's basic Brut NV but as my note notes, it is much better than "basic." Tech Note: 12% Alcohol. 80% Chardonnay and 20% Pinot Noir fermented using Methode Champenoise with 36 months aging on the yeast. Straw in color, bright, clear and sparkling. Offers refreshing acidity under white and yellow citrus and tree fruit (lemon and green apple fruit with hint of peach), clean toasty yeast notes, and dusty-minerally terroir. It is long, lively, and refreshing with a clean finish. Elegant, fresh, and focused; alive-in-the-mouth. Excellent. Spec's Score: 91.

DEUTZ Brut Classic, Champagne, NV

6x750ml \$47.49 \$261.07

Tech Note: 12% Alcohol. A blend of 38% Pinot Noir, 32% Pinot Meunier, and 30% Chardonnay from Ay, Marne Valley, Cotes des Blancs, and Montagne de Reims, 40% of which comes from Deutz' own vineyards. 100% malolactic fermentation is used. Straw in color, fully sparkling; dry, medium light-bodied with balanced acidity. Juicy, lively, ripe, lemony citrus flavors. Toasty-biscuity. Very long, refreshing finish; alive-in-the-mouth. Complete and delicious. Spec's Score: 90+.

G.H. MUMM Cordon Rouge Brut, Champagne, NV

12x750ml \$36.39 \$396.39

Tech Note: 12.5% Alcohol. A blend of 45% Pinot Noir, 24% Pinot Meunier, and 30% Chardonnay. Gets three years on the yeast and has about 1% residual sugar after dosage. Straw in color. Dry, light-bodied with fresh acidity, and a hint of phenolics. Fresh and citrusy with lots of minerals and enough toast. The Chardonnay is dominant. Fresh and vivid in the mouth. Bear Note: Fine Aperitif and lighter food style. Spec's Score: 91.

J.P. MARNIQUET Brut Tradition, Champagne, NV

12x750ml \$30.39 \$343.95

Tech Note: 12% Alcohol. An estate-bottled blend of a shocking 50% Pinot Meunier (that is a LOT of Pinot Meunier), 35% Chardonnay, and 15% Pinot Noir from an RM (recoltant manipulant) producer. Straw in color, fully sparkling. Dry, medium-bodied with fresh acidity. Toasty-yeasty-biscuity with lively lemony citrus and some red fruit with limestone mineral and a hint of spice. Really very long finish. Bear Note: Delicious, focused, fresh, alive-in-the-mouth. I really like the biscuity taste. Yum. Maybe a new Dalton house Champagne? Spec's Score: 92.

JOSE DHONDT Blanc de Blancs, Champagne, NV (Very Limited)

12x750ml \$47.14 \$530.85

Tech: 12% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay grown in the Cote de Blancs Chalk, 25-45 year vines trained on three canes, no ML. Straw in color, day bright and clear with plenty of bubbles; medium-light-bodied with fresh acidity and very light phenolic note. Dusty-minerally, spicy, fresh Champagne with lemon and tree fruit and lots of toast and terroir. Long and precisely focused; quite delicious.. Excellent. Spec's Score: 93.

PANNIER Brut Tradition, Champagne, NV

12x750ml \$26.99 \$304.37

Tech: 12% Alcohol. A made in a co-op (but a very good co-op) blend of 40% Chardonnay, 30% Pinot Noir, 30% Pinot Meunier (with 25% coming from older reserve wines) all from a high quality co-op that buys no sur lattes. Pale straw in color, bright and clear and fully sparkling; dry, medium-bodied with refreshingly crisp acidity and a very light phenolic note. Spicy, lively, bright, ripe citrus with a note of red fruit along with minerally-chalky-earth terroir and subtle accents of toast. Very long finish. Fine tension, fresh, focused; bright and alive-in-the-mouth. Spec's Score: 90+.

PERRIER-JOUET Grand Brut, Champagne, NV

12x750ml \$33.24 \$396.28

Tech Note: 12% Alcohol. A base blend of 40% Pinot Noir, 40% Pinot Meunier and 20% Chardonnay with plus or minus 15% reserve wines from previous vintages. Dosage of 11 grams per liter. Straw in color. Dry, medium light-bodied with fresh acidity. Fresh and toasty with ripe citrus and some biscuity character. Good floral notes. Better than I remembered it. Pretty in the mouth. Quite tasty. Spec's Score: 91.

PIERRE MORLET Brut Grand Reserve, Champagne, NV

12x750ml \$38.99 \$439.20

Tech: 12% Alcohol. A blend of 74% Pinot Noir and 26% Chardonnay with components from the Morlet family's terroirs of Premiers Crus Avenay-Val-d'Or, Bisseuil and Mutigny and of Grand Cru Ay, it is partially fermented in French oak "demi-muids" (500-liter barrels). Yellow straw in color, bright, clear, and sparkling; dry, medium-bodied with balanced acidity. Yeasty-biscuity with developed citrusy fruit and minerally earth. Very long finish. Complete, satisfying, delicious; rich and lovely in the mouth. Excellent. Spec's Score: 92+.

HENRIOT Brut Souverain, Champagne, NV

12x750ml \$36.99 \$417.24

Tech: 12% Alcohol 40% Chardonnay (Cote de Blancs) and 60% Pinot Noir (Montagne de Reims). Rich straw color, bright and clear with a fine bead; dry, medium-bodied with crisp acidity; very light phenolics and a mineral chalk finish. Juicy, crisp, refreshing, toasty with lemony ripe citrus accented with yeast and mineral flavors. Long and focused; elegant bubbly. Spec's Score: 92. (This was the top French bubbly from the 2012 Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo International Wine Competition.)

DELAMOTTE Brut Le Mesnil, Champagne, NV

12x750ml \$40.84 \$230.58

Tech Note: 12% Alcohol. 50% Chardonnay, 30% Pinot Noir, and 20% Pinot Meunier with all of the Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grapes coming from Grand Cru vineyards. 3 years on the lees and no use of oak, no particular yeast selection and only a little blending to guide the wine. Pale straw in color. Dry, medium-plus-bodied with fresh acidity. Toasty, earthy, rich. Lots of feel and flavor in the mouth. Ripe citrus and some red fruit. Lovely Texture. Enough mineral but not over the top. Bear Note: Really Delicious in a lovely, more aperitif style. Spec's Score: 93+.

JEAN LAURENT Blanc de Noirs Brut, Champagne, NV

12x750ML \$44.64 \$503.18

Tech Note: 12% Alcohol. This is a fresh, juicy, flavorful, ripe fruit oriented 100% Pinot Noir Champagne with notes of yeast, minerals, and lemon drops and subtle red fruit (strawberry). It is long, focused, and lively in the mouth with good weight, and a nice mousse. Solid and delicious with a fine rich feel. Finishes clean and dry. Super with food. Excellent. Spec's Score: 92+.



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LOUIS SACY Brut Original "67%", Champagne, NV**12x750ml \$28.49 \$320.62**

Tech: 12% Alcohol. A blend of 67% Pinot Noir with 30% Chardonnay and 3% Pinot Meunier. Gold-straw in color and fully sparkling; dry, medium-light-bodied with fresh acidity. A yeast-fruit-and-mineral nose gives way to a crisp, fresh palate featuring citrus and a bit of red fruit accented by yeast and a sort of flinty-brimstone minerality. Fresh and focused, it is best suited to be served as an aperitif or with the lightest seafoods. Perfect with oysters. With time in the glass, the brimstone blows off but the beam of minerality continues on. Spec's Score: 90+.

DUVAL LEROY Brut, Champagne, NV**12x750ml \$28.49 \$320.62**

Tech: 12% Alcohol. The winery's tech sheet states "The Maison Duval-Leroy revels in the art of blending Pinots and Chardonnays" and allows that Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Pinot Meunier are all used. Pale-gold-straw in color and fully sparkling; dry, medium-bodied with fresh acidity. Toasty, rich nose with ripe citrus and some earthy red fruit. Richer and yeastier in the mouth than is standard for Brut Non-Vintage. There is an earthy mineral component but the toasty-yeastiness takes over. This is serious food Champagne. Delicious. Spec's Score: 91+.

LAURENT PERRIER Brut LP, Champagne, NV**6x750ml \$40.39 \$226.92**

Tech: 12% Alcohol. A blend of 50% Chardonnay, 35% Pinot Noir, and 15% Pinot Meunier. Light-gold-straw in color and fully sparkling; dry, medium-bodied with freshly balanced acidity and just a hint skin of contact phenolics. Medium rich, toasty nose that leads to a palate offering mixed citrus with some earthy red fruit, lots of toasted-yeasty-bready notes and an earth and mineral terroir component. Satisfying and delicious. Can serve as a richer aperitif or sipping Champagne but is also well suited to food. Lovely feel in the mouth. Spec's Score: 93.

2009 Cru Classé Bordeaux Tasting at the InterContinental Hotel

On January 19th, 2012, Spec's will host over thirty Bordeaux chateau owners, directors, and/or winemakers presenting forty top-appellation Bordeaux wines all from the excellent 2009 vintage in a standup-and-walk-around tasting format. This is the first time Houston has ever hosted such a delegation from Bordeaux. The event will be held at the INTER-CONTINENTAL HOTEL. (Please note the change in venue). The list of well-known and highly regarded wineries has come together. By appellation, they include ...

Pomerol: Chx. Gazin and Clinet

St. Emilion: Chx. Angelus, Canon La Gaffeliere, Clos L'Oratoire, and Daugay

Castillon: Ch. d'Aiguilhe

St. Estephe: Chx. Lafon Rochet and les Ormes de Pez

Pauillac: Chx. Pichon Baron, Pibran, Lynch Bages (with Echo de Lynch Bages and Lynch Bages Blanc as well), Grand Puy Lacoste, Haut Batailley, d'Armailhac, Clerc Milon, and Haut Bages Liberal

St. Julien: Chx. Branaire Ducru, Ch. Leoville Poyferrre, Talbot, Lagrange, and Gloria

Margaux: Chx. Brane Cantenac (along with Baron de Brane), Cantenac Brown, and Ferriere

Haut Medoc: Chx. Cantemerle, Chasse Spleen, Camensac, and Poujeaux

Pessac Leognan (Graves): Ch. Carbonnieux (both red & white), Domaine de Chevalier (both red & white), Smith Haut Lafitte (both red and white) and Clos Marsalette

Sauternes: Ch. Suduiraut

The tasting will open at 4:30pm and run until 8:30pm, giving tasters ample time to taste the wines and visit with our guests from Bordeaux. The tasting will include a spread of artisanal cheeses and breads chosen to help absorb the wines and refresh the palate. We will be tasting from Riedel Degustazione glasses.

The 2009 Cru Classé Bordeaux Tasting will cost \$60.00 total per person cash (\$63.15 regular). The event will start at 4:30pm and run through 8:30pm on Thursday January 19th. To reserve your spot for this unique Bordeaux Event, please call 832-660-0250 or email JessicaToner@specsonline.com. The InterContinental is located at 2222 West Loop South (on the south-bound feeder between San Felipe and Westheimer).

The tasting will open at 4:30pm and run until 8:30pm, giving tasters ample time to taste the wines and visit with our guests from Bordeaux. The tasting will include a spread of artisanal cheeses and breads chosen to help absorb the wines and refresh the palate. We will be tasting from Riedel Degustazione glasses.

The 2009 Cru Classé Bordeaux Tasting will cost \$65.00 total per person cash (\$68.42 regular). The event will start at 4:30pm and run through 8:30pm on Thursday January 19th. To reserve your spot for this unique Bordeaux Event, please call 832-660-0250 or email JessicaToner@specsonline.com. The InterContinental is located at 2222 West Loop South (on the south-bound feeder between San Felipe and Westheimer).

Rodeo Uncorked! Round Up and Best Bites

Save the evening of Sunday, February 19th for Houston's best annual wine and food event: The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo's Rodeo Uncorked Round Up and Best Bites Competition at Reliant Center. Sample over 200 award-winning wines from the Show's 9th annual International Wine Competition (that's the "Round Up" part along with food (that's the "Best Bites" part) from over 60 of Houston's best restaurants, caterers, and specialty shops. The fun starts at 6:30pm and runs through 9:pm. Advance individual tickets are \$125. Reserved tables for 10 start at \$1800. A limited number of premium tables for 10 are available for \$2,000. Table buyers and their guests get in 30 minutes early at 6:00pm. This event has sold out every year. Proceeds go to support the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo's mission of Education, Agriculture, Entertainment, and Western Heritage.

Rodeo Uncorked! Champion Wine Auction and Dinner

This evening includes a reception with cocktails and hors d'oeuvres, a silent auction of champion wines and related items, a sumptuous seated dinner with winning wines served from the competition, and the excitement of live auction bidding for award-winning and champion wines.

Auction packages are available for \$6,000, \$9,000 and \$12,000 for tables of 10; the total table price may be used in the live auction. Limited tickets are available for \$300 per person or a table for \$3,000 (these dinner-only package purchasers may not apply any of the table or ticket price toward the live auction).

Details: Saturday, March 3, 2012 Reception: 6 p.m.; Dinner: 7 p.m.; Auction: 8 p.m. 2nd floor Reliant Center in the 600 series rooms.

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The Wine School at l'Alliance Française presents WINE 101: A Four-Week Course on Wine Basics

Please join Spec's corporate fine wine buyer Bear Dalton for this four-week Wine Basics course. "Wine 101" is focused both for those just developing their interest in wine and those who feel the need for a good review to help organize their tasting and thinking about wine. This class also would be a good place to start for a service professional looking to move more into the wine side of the restaurant business or anyone looking to move into the wholesale or retail wine trade. As wine from all over the world is now so readily available, the 40 wines we will taste over the four-week class will come from all over the world.

Week 1 (1/23/12): Why Taste? Starting at the beginning: The basics of tasting. Tasting wine versus drinking wine. Sensory Evaluation. Types of tasting. Blind tasting. Playing "The Options Game". Ten wines will be tasted. Additional topics will include proper glassware, wine tools, and the restaurant wine ritual.

Week 2 (1/30/12): White wine making and white wine varieties and styles. We will taste ten white wines including Chardonnay with & without oak, off-dry whites, and sweet dessert wine. Topics will include how grape growing and winemaking affect wine style and flavors and how the types of wine represented by those tasted pair with food. We also will talk about wine storage and wine preservation and the concept of terroir.

Week 3 (2/6/12): Red (and Rosé) wine making and red wine varieties. We will taste ten red wines representing a range of styles and varieties including new world versus old world comparisons. Topics will include how grape growing and winemaking affect wine style and flavors and how the types of wine represented by those tasted pair with food. We also will talk about age-ability and age-worthiness as well as wine keeping and wine collecting.

Week 4 (2/13/12): Sparkling Wines (ranging from the Charmat bulk process wines – such as Prosecco – to real French Champagne) and Fortified wines focusing mostly on Port. We will discuss grape varieties, styles, techniques and their impact on flavor. We will discuss decanting and decanters and pairing these unusual partners with food.

The four-week Wine 101 will cost \$220.00 total per person cash (\$231.58 regular) for all four sessions. The course will meet at 7pm on Monday January 23, January 30, February 6, and February 13 of 2012. To reserve your spot for this unique four-week class, please call 832-660-0250 or email amandahardy@specsonline.com. All sessions of this class will be held at l'Alliance Française, the French cultural center in Houston. Located at 427 Lovett Blvd., l'Alliance is on the southeast corner of Lovett and Whitney (one block south of Westheimer and two blocks east of Montrose). ✨