

# LUXE CHAMPAGNE

By Charles M. Bear Dalton

**luxe** (lūks)

- n.* 1. The condition of being elegantly sumptuous.  
2. Something luxurious; a luxury.

**Champagne** (SHam'pān)

- n.* 1. A white sparkling wine associated with celebration, typically that made (especially from Pinot Noir and Chardonnay) in the Champagne region of France.  
2. A historical region and former province of northeast France. It was incorporated into the French royal domain in 1314. The sparkling wine Champagne was first produced there around 1700

So how does “luxe” apply to wine? Some would contend that all wine is a luxury. I’m willing to accept that. Others would contend that wine, like food, is a necessity. I get their point as well. Nevertheless, there are wines that transcend whatever necessity, whether sustenance or complement (in the sense of “complete-ment”) or comfort, that wine may be. These are great wines that provide all of this and more. That “more” can be more emotional experience than mere beverage. These are “sumptuous” (even if austere) wines, wines that can transport you out of your body or even out of time. These are wines with which you want some alone time. Some, maybe most, of these wines offer an exuberant joy but some can offer a severe or even solemn joy. But joy in the sense of pleasure and intellectual as well as sensual stimulation is part of the Luxe Wine Experience. They are never cheap but they are ever amazing. Even though quantities of luxe wines are usually limited, many of them are commercially available because the prices they command often disqualify a large number of people who otherwise want to buy and drink them.

While many types of wines can be luxe, no other class of wines is more luxe than Champagne. Champagne should be the first wine of the evening and can be the last. There is luxury in even the most basic real Champagne but it is the top cuvees that give you “luxe.” These wines define Luxe Champagne.

**DOM PÉRIGNON OENOTHÈQUE BLANC, Champagne, 1996**

**6x750ml Scheck Scheck**

12.5% Alcohol. The blend is unpublished but the producer notes that typically, there is “a commensurate amount of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in any given

year of Dom Perignon.” Whatever the blend, the cuvee was aged 15 years on the yeasts before disgorgement and finishing. **Sensory Note:** pale-gold-straw in color, and with sparkling; dry, medium bodied with fresh acidity and minimal phenolics. Pale gold color. Starts with nothing and then ... WOW!. Changes in the mouth with richness and flavor added to richness. The color actually lightened in the glass after it was poured. Has the minerality of a grand cru chablis along with lemony citrus and darker red fruit. The complex and complete flavors come in waves. Super length with the toasty Champagne character completely integrated. Stunning. This is Champagne as WINE and really outstanding wine at that. Drink this from wine glasses rather than flutes or tulips. Consider decanting it. **100.** (This stunningly outstanding wine had three men with over 80 combined years of wine trade experience giggling like three tipling teenagers.)

**VEUVE CLICQUOT La Grande Dame, Champagne, 1998**

**1x750ml \$124.44**

12.5% Alcohol. A blend of 64% Pinot Noir (sourced from the Grands Crus at Ay (Vallée de la Marne), and Verzenay, Verzy, Ambonnay and Bouzy (Montagne de Reims) and 36% Chardonnay (sourced from three Grands Crus: Avize, Oger and Le Mesnil-sur-Oger, all in the Côte des Blancs). **Sensory Note:** Deep-straw in color and fully sparkling; dry, medium-bodied with fresh acidity and minimal phenolics. Rich and delicious. Lots of freshness and lots of integrated citrus and tropical as well as earthy red fruit accented with toast and spice and mineral earth. Classic La Grande Dame. This is a WOW Champagne. Deep, developed, and delicious. **97+.**

**DOM RUINART Blanc de Blancs, Champagne, 2002**

**6x750ml \$120.99 \$666.00**

12.5% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay sourced from the Grands Crus vineyards (72% Côte des Blancs, predominantly Chouilly and Avize, and 28% from the northern slopes of the Montagne de Reims, predominantly Sillery and Puisieulx). **Sensory:** Straw in color with green highlights. Dry, medium-bodied with fresh acidity and minimal phenolics. Really elegant but still lively with fine freshness and brightness. Lots of citrus and more with plenty of mineral. Again, the toast and yeast are elegantly integrated and the feel in the mouth is almost playful. Great aperitif Champagne. Sneaks up on you. Subtle but ultimately offers joy with a dash of solemnity and

even restraint. **95.** I initially underrated this and may still be doing so.

### **The Rarest of the Rare ...**

#### **VEUVE CLICQUOT Cave Privée Brut, Champagne, 1990**

**3x750ml \$199.99 \$563.64**

11.1% Alcohol. A blend of 56% Pinot Noir, 11% Pinot Meunier, and 33% Chardonnay from 17 crus all over Champagne made to be the 1990 vintage. There were no real “belles and whistles” in the winemaking, blending, and champenization. The big difference here is that these bottles were kept “en tirage” in Clicquot’s cold chalk cellars until they were disgorged in 2008 and then dosed at only 4 grams per liter (and so are a sort of “Extra Brut”). This Cave Privée wine then received an additional four years of bottle aging before its final release in 2012. **Sensory:** Pale golden straw in color, fully sparkling with remarkable richness. Quite dry with still very fresh acidity and a scant hint of phenolics. The nose is rich and toasty with notes of cocoa and even coffee with whiffs of red fruit and citrus as well as a chalky minerality. The mouth brings more of the same with still ample effervescence. As the wine warms and flattens a bit, it gains in richness and texture. Its depth and complexity command your interest. As it opens further and further, the wine moves past being a beverage into the range of an experience. This isn’t an “aperitif” Champagne or a “food” Champagne, rather, this is contemplative Champagne that peels back to reveal layer after layer. You’ll want to drink this with and as part of a conversation. This wine is a great pleasure. **97.** (If I hadn’t so recently tasted Dom Perignon Oenotheque 1996 and La Grande Dame 1998, both of which set a very high standard, I may have/likely would rated this higher.) There are fewer than 20 bottles of this Cave Privée for sale in Texas. There are also a couple of bottles (literally) of 1989 Cave Privée Rose.

**THREE NEW CHAMPAGNES from a consortium of the various Barons Rothschild. Spec’s is one of a select handful of retailers in the US who were offered these highly anticipated wines.**

#### **BARONS de ROTHSCHILD Blanc de Blancs (Grand Cru), Champagne, NV**

**6x750ml \$118.74 \$668.68**

12.5% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay from Cru’s in the Cote du Blanc (Avize, Cramant, Mesnil-Sur-Oger,

Oger and Vertus). 40% Reserve Wine. Aged on the lees 9 months. **Sensory:** Pale-gold-straw in color; dry, medium-bodied with fresh acidity. Classic Chardonnay Champagne, with lots of freshness. Elegant mostly citrus fruit but with real complexity and depth. Fine elegant texture. Really holds the interest. Sort of Blanc de Blancs version of Krug’s Grand Cuvee. **95+.**

#### **BARONS de ROTHSCHILD Brut, Champagne, NV**

**6x750ml \$94.99 \$534.36**

12.5% Alc. A blend of 60% Chardonnay and 40% Pinot Noir. The Chardonnay is from the Cotes du Blancs and the Pinot is from Verzenay, Ay, Mareuil-sur-Ay and Bouzy. 40% of the cuvee is reserve wines (all grand and premier cru) 3 years on the lees. **Sensory:** Pale gold straw in color; dry, medium light-bodied with fresh acidity and a hint of phenolics (which is not at all uncommon for richer Champagne cuvees). Richer and riper than the Blanc de Blancs with a fine toasty feel. Mix of red fruit and more citrus with a bit of bitter at the end. Big enough to be a friend to food. Will stand up to aging and would be improved in the short term by a gentle decanting. **94.**

#### **BARONS de ROTHSCHILD Brut Rosé, Champagne, NV**

**6x750ml \$118.74 \$668.68**

Tech: 12.5% Alcohol. A blend of 85% Chardonnay with 15% still red Pinot. Noir. The Chardonnay is from the Cote du Blanc (Avize, Cramant, Mesnil-Sur-Oger, Oger and Vertus - all Grand crus), The Pinot Noir is from the Montagne de Reims. (40% of the total comes from reserve wines). Aged on the lees for 9 months. **Sensory:** salmon-orange in color; dry, medium-bodied with balanced acidity and very light phenolics. Richer with more red fruit. Lots of fruit and lots of toasty richness with enough chalky minerality to keep it elegant. Long and again, quite food friendly. This is Champagne to keep. **94+.**

(I suspect my next note on all three of these Rothschild wines will show higher scores as they were still settling down after shipping when I tasted them. I can hardly wait.)

**TWO LUXE CHAMPAGNES tasted (well, actually drunk) in a Luxe situation: a limo on the way to and from an event at the Toyota Center. (I have other notes on these two wines but these are the most fun.)**

*On the way to ...*

**KRUG Grand Cuvee, Champagne, NV**

**6x750ml \$141.89 \$777.60**

12% Alcohol. An unspecified blend of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and Pinot Meunier, Possibly dozens of wines sourced from 6 to 10 vintages that, after blending and second fermentation, is aged another 6 years on the lees (en tirage). The complete, real-deal, specific tech info is unavailable. But, after drinking the wine, I don't really care all that much. **Sensory:** Due to the situation in which we enjoyed this wine, I have no color note. Dry, medium-bodied with freshly balanced acidity and scant but still present phenolics. On pouring, there is the expected citrus fruit, toast, and mineral. As the wine warms and bubbles and flattens a bit in the glass, the citrus expands beyond lemon as some tree fruit (apple, pear?) and subtle red fruit essence comes in, the simple toast expands to toasted brioche served in a bakery, and the mineral combines with the acidity to provide structure and depth. Bear Note: The wine starts interesting but becomes complex and intriguing. It satisfies as if it were an aged red Burgundy. Truly delicious. Goes way beyond basic "Brut Non-Vintage." **95+**.

*On the way home ...*

**DOM PERIGNON Rosé, Champagne, 2000**

**6x750ml \$372.29 \$1,034.78**

12% Alc. A blend of 45% Chardonnay and 55% Pinot Noir, of which 1/4 is still red Pinot Noir. **Sensory:** No color note due to the dark limo. Dry, medium full-bodied with freshly balanced acidity and light phenolics. Deep, rich, and satisfying with supple red fruit and enough ripe citrus to keep it balanced. There is richness from the red fruit and the distinctive toasty-yeasty biscuit character. So good in the mouth, you are reluctant to swallow. Satisfying and delicious. Bear Note: More than being Champagne that can stand up to food, this is Champagne that nourishes; it is Champagne AS food. **97**.

Now, don't you feel all decadent?

\*\*\*\* FOR A BOX \*\*\*\*

**WARNING – CAUTION –TAKE NOTE**

All of these Luxe Champagnes should be served in wine glasses (not skinny little Champagne flutes, awful coupes, or ridiculous trumpets) but in proper wine glasses that give them enough room to develop a bouquet and you enough room to swirl the wine. Yes, I wrote swirl. This is wine you are drinking, you can swirl it. I prefer the Riedel Vinum Grand Cru Riesling glass. All but the Dom Ruinart and the Cave Privee could benefit from a gentle decanting into a cool, appropriately-sized decanter. Ultimate serving temperature should be about 45°F. You can get away with serving colder but the wine will just take longer to open up.

Luxe Champagne, like all wines and even all foods can disappoint but when they disappoint, it is more often our failing rather than the failing of the wine that generates that disappointment. We serve them too warm or too cold or in the wrong glass. We store them wrong or don't give them the time need to open up. You wouldn't buy a \$100 lobe of foie gras and put it in the Crock Pot to cook. No. You'd carefully pan sear it and you'd make a fuss over the few things that go on the plate with it and the wine you drink with it. Likewise, you shouldn't buy a Luxe Champagne and treat it like a \$6 bottle of carbonated plonk. Rather, you should think about the circumstance and with whom you will share the experience. You don't want to be transported with just anyone.

