

PREMIUM

Bollinger Vieilles Vignes Françaises: a rare prestige cuvée

Is this the best blanc de noirs in the world? The cult following of this sought-after Champagne certainly seems to think so. Charles Curtis MW introduces a vertical tasting of six past vintages, plus the new 2008 release.

Charles Curtis MW

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Provignage layering of vines at the Chaudes Terres plot in Aÿ, ungrafted vines entirely tended by hand for Vieilles Vignes Françaises

Scroll down for tasting notes of 7 vintages of Bollinger Vieilles Vignes Françaises, including one that scores 100 points

Ungrafted vines

Although the bottling is called Vieilles Vignes Françaises [‘Old French Vines’], the vines are not particularly old. The secret of the rarity is that the vines are grown in the same way that they were before the **phylloxera** scourge ravaged French vineyards beginning in the mid-19th century.

This tiny insect, imported from America, was nearly always fatal to European vines, which had to be grafted onto resistant American **rootstock** to survive. Despite the near-universal triumph of root louse over vine stock, pockets of ungrafted vines persist and these furnish the raw material for this extraordinarily rare fizz.

Special plots

Before the phylloxera invasion, grapevines were not planted individually as they are today. Instead, they were propagated via layering. New vines were established by burying the cane of an existing vine in a trench about six inches deep, a process called *provinage* (*see main image*). This cane would then develop roots, and consequently, large swaths of vineyards (called *crus*, or growths) all shared the same root system. The planting system was known as ‘*en foule*’ – literally, ‘in a heap’.

Vines planted this way have long been part of **Bollinger**’s rich patrimony of vineyard holdings in the southern part of the Montagne de Reims. Family matriarch Lily Bollinger decided in the 1960s to vinify the plots separately at the suggestion of wine writer Cyril Ray. The first vintage was 1969, timed to coincide with her 70th birthday.

Grand cru fruit

Until 2004 Bollinger retained three small vineyards of ungrafted vines.

Two are in the grand cru village of Aÿ in the lieux-dits of the Clos-Saint-Jacques (vineyard size: 0.21 hectares) and Chaudes Terres (0.15 hectares). Most of the vines here are ‘*en foule*’, although some are ungrafted but planted in rows on stakes.

Until 2004, there was also a third vineyard of 0.16 hectares located in Bouzy grand cru called Croix Rouge. Unlike the sites in Aÿ, this was not enclosed with walls and eventually succumbed to phylloxera. The last vintage that included fruit from the site in Bouzy was the 2004.

Rich style

As with many blanc de noirs made exclusively from **Pinot Noir**, VVF (as it is affectionately known to devotees) is an incredibly rich Champagne.

The nose often shows notes of ripe apricot, marzipan, and white blossoms overlaid with notes of smoke and brioche from the decade it typically spends on the lees.

There is also a tangy edge and dense, creamy texture that both come from the cask fermentation.

In my experience, the wine requires several years of bottle age after release for it to show at its best.

Associate chef de cave Dennis Brunner describes it thus: 'We consider this Champagne above all as a grand vin – the wine is so dense one can almost forget the effervescence! It is characterised by its opulence, intensity and persistence on the palate, sensations tied to low yields, high-density planting (24,000 vines/ha), and its warm microclimate within the walls of a clos. For us it is the memory of an eternal Champagne.'

Vintages and pricing

Vintages released have included 1969, 1970, 1973, 1975, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1985, 1986, 1988, 1989, 1992, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009 and 2010, with the 2008 due to be released later this year.

The current 2010 vintage averages \$1,165 (£826) at retail. The average price at auction for the maturing 1996 vintage last year (including premium) was \$1,770 (£1,250), while just one bottle of the landmark 1979 vintage has sold thus far in 2021, at Zachys Wine Auctions in New York, for \$3,968 (£2,802) including premium.

Bollinger Vieilles Vignes Françaises: a vertical tasting

Bollinger, Brut Vintage Vieilles Vignes Françaises, Champagne, France 2008

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Spectacular wine. One of the finest vintages of the last 20 years, with excellent ripeness yet superb balance. The fruit from the ungrafted Pinot Noir in Aÿ was picked on 16 September and fermented in cask before being aged for 10 years, dosed at 8g/L. The result is still youthful...

Points 99



Bollinger, Brut Vintage Vieilles Vignes Françaises, Champagne, France 2007

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This blanc de noirs is produced with Pinot Noir from two tiny plots of ungrafted vines in grand cru Aÿ that were harvested on 31 August. The first run juice from the press was fermented in cask and aged for eight years before being disgorged with a dosage of 8g/L....

Points 97



Bollinger, Brut Vintage Vieilles Vignes Françaises, Champagne, France 2005

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A ripe, somewhat damp year produced lush results – Bollinger waited until 22 September to harvest. The ungrafted Pinot Noir from these two small plots in Aÿ delivered a wine with aromas of ripe pear, marzipan and bread dough. No dosage was added in order to preserve...

Points 96



Bollinger, Brut Vintage Vieilles Vignes Françaises, Champagne, France 2002

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A superb vintage, with warm, dry conditions promoting ripening and cool nights helping retain acidity. This vintage still contained fruit from the ungrafted vines in Bouzy, and Bollinger

waited until 20 September to pick (nearly a week later than everyone). After fermentation in...

Points 100



Bollinger, Brut Vintage Vieilles Vignes Françaises, Champagne, France 1999

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1999 was a big harvest, with ripe grapes swollen with water from the rain at harvest. There were more than 5,000 bottles of Vieilles Vignes Françaises produced. The result is surprisingly accessible, with a ripe, toasty nose of apples, hazelnut, and fresh cream with a mineral...

Points 91



Bollinger, Brut Vintage Vieilles Vignes Françaises, Champagne, France 1996

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My experience with this vintage is transcendent, with the vinous, lush nature of the ungrafted Pinot from Aÿ counteracting the trenchant acidity of the vintage. The nose has an almost red

fruit character, along with hints of marzipan, spice and brioche. The aromas are still youthful...

Points 94



Bollinger, Brut Vintage Vieilles Vignes Françaises, Champagne, France 1995

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Too youthful, really, to drink, yet fascinating all the same. The nose has a pronounced savoury character that is almost aggressive and very powerful. Bursting with mousse, the wine is so palpably dense on the palate that one almost needs a fork. Balanced acidity, a ton of extract; t...

Points 95



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