

10 Things Every Wine Lover Should Know About Billecart-Salmon



Tom Hyland takes a look at the Champagne house that opts for "finesse over brute strength"

Posted Thursday, 18-Sep-2014 (via *Wine Searcher*)

<http://www.wine-searcher.com/m/2014/09/10-things-every-wine-lover-should-know-about-billecart-salmon>

1. In family hands

The Champagne firm of Billecart-Salmon in Mareuil-sur-Áy was established in 1818 when Niçolas François Billecart married Elizabeth Salmon; it has remained independently controlled by the family ever since, even though the Frey Group have owned a 45 percent share since 2005. Today the house is managed by brothers François and Antoine Roland-Billecart, who represent the sixth generation. Production averages 1.7 million bottles per year.

2. The house style

How does Antoine Roland-Billecart define the house style? "Freshness, elegance, fruit style and wine style. We always want to remind you that [Champagne](#) is a wine. Prior to Champagne, we produce a wine." He notes that viticulture is quite distinctive at the 46th parallel, about as far north as wine cultivars will ripen. "We really have to take care of the fruit. We're not alcohol chasing for maturity, we're more into freshness."

3. Champagne Rosé, not a Rosé Champagne

The [Billecart-Salmon Rosé](#) has been celebrated as one of the finest of its type. Roland-Billecart wants you to remember its true character. "We consider our Rosé to be a Champagne Rosé and not a Rosé Champagne. Because if you were blind tasting it, you wouldn't guess it was a Rosé." He notes the **unusual blend of this rosé**, which has about 30 percent Pinot Meunier in the blend with almost 50 percent Chardonnay. "In a rosé, it's unusual to find such an amount of Chardonnay. But it's not a completely manufactured wine for Champagne. It has a reason. The reason is just because it's a rosé doesn't mean it has to get more Pinot Noir, because that's exactly what people begin to think. No, not for us, we're different."

4. Highlighting Pinot Meunier

While some Champagne houses that use Pinot Meunier in their cuvées de-emphasize its role in their wines, Billecart-Salmon highlights this variety. "We love Pinot Meunier, we use a lot of Pinot Meunier in the blend of the Brut Reserve. It's almost 45 percent, so it's huge," he says. **With Meunier, it all depends on how you work it.** If you work it nicely, with respect, with cool sessions of fermentation, you not only get the fruit, you get more. You get texture, you get a creamy aspect, you get a great structure to blend with Chardonnay."

5. Starting cool and slow

All of the base wines go through a cold settling at 8° C (46° F) and a very cold fermentation just under 13° that takes between three weeks and a month, which is a **longer time frame than other producers.** This practice

was initiated in 1958, making Billecart-Salmon the first Champagne house to do so; they are still the only one to do this with all the wines.

6. Selective malolactic fermentation

Malolactic fermentation, the process of transforming the crisp malic acid to a softer, creamier lactic acid is practiced by most Champagne producers, but only selectively at Billecart-Salmon. "What does malolactic bring in Champagne?" asks Roland-Billecart. "Complexity." However, to produce this complexity, the prestige [Cuvée Nicolas François Billecart](#) is put through malolactic, while the [Blanc de Blancs](#) is not. "With the Blanc de Blancs, you get the complexity from all the different villages," Roland-Billecart notes. "That's why the blend of this wine is made in this way."

7. Keeping the dosage low

Roland-Billecart believes that [dosage](#) should be minimal in his Champagnes; certain wines in the range are at an extremely low level at the equivalent of the Extra Brut level (six grams per liter and under). "After a certain period of aging in the cellar, I would say that dosage is not that important. But if you didn't make a good job prior to the vinification, then you have to make a high dosage. Dosage is almost like makeup. If you have to use a lot of makeup, then you have something to hide, right?"

8. From a tennis court to a distinguished vineyard

Adjacent to the main offices is the Clos Saint-Hilaire parcel, which has served several purposes over the years. Formerly a tennis court, a vegetable garden and even a greenhouse, this one-hectare plot was planted exclusively to Pinot Noir in 1964. Today, farmed biodynamically with the use of draft horses, this vineyard is the source of the house's [rarest cuvée](#), which is named after the site. The wine is vinified entirely in oak barrels, receives no dosage and has only been produced from three vintages to date: 1995, 1996 and 1998, with average production of 3000 bottles. The 1999 will be the next release, although the release date has not yet been announced.

9. A preference among sommeliers and critics

"I have been a fan and a follower of Billecart-Salmon for a good 20-plus years," says Roger Dagorn, M.S., currently Beverage Director for One Five Hospitality in New York City. "Billecart-Salmon is a relatively small Champagne house, and pretty much under the radar. Their Rosé has a cult following among many wine aficionados as well as most sommeliers. Its appeal is its dryness and elegance. The vibrant, bright salmon color also adds to its appeal. I would rate the producer as one of my favorites." W. Craig Cooper, beverage director at Pops for Champagne in Chicago, shares those sentiments. "Since so many of the great smaller Champagne Houses lean toward a fuller, richer house style, it is refreshing and reassuring to come across a house with such a consistent offering of elegant, fresh, and bright champagnes across every cuvée in their lineup. Billecart-Salmon is perhaps the best representation of a Champagne house that has chosen finesse over brute strength." In his book *The Champagne Guide 2014-2015*, Australian author Tyson Stelzer awards Billecart-Salmon his highest ranking, 10 out of 10; only three other Champagne producers were similarly rated.

10. Champagne of the Millennium

At a three-day tasting in Stockholm in the spring of 1999, several Champagne authorities such as Richard Juhlin, Serena Sutcliffe and Robert Joseph set about to identify the "Champagne of the Millennium." Among the wines that were judged were superlative cuvées from such esteemed houses as Dom Pérignon, Krug, Taittinger, Pol Roger and Louis Roederer. When Antoine Roland-Billecart received the notice for this event, he initially turned it down. He soon changed his mind, however, and decided to enter the 1959 and 1961 Nicolas François Billecart in the competition. The 1959, incidentally, had a hand-written label, as it was so quickly assembled for the competition. The results of the tasting had the 1959 singled out as the "Champagne of the Millennium", while the 1961 finished second. Needless to say, Roland-Billecart was glad he reconsidered.