

Billecart-Salmon 2006 Cuvée Elisabeth Salmon

Michael Edwards enjoyed the new prestige cuvée rosé at a seminar in London, where Antoine Roland-Billecart presented the house's current releases



Of the *grandes maisons* still run by the founding family, Billecart is the most Gallic. Celebrating its 200th anniversary in 2018, this old family can trace its story back to the 1600s, when a Billecart was parliamentary counselor to Louis XIII. No house has a longer *savoir-faire* in Champagne-making, from generation to generation of the family, its wine growers and cellar masters. All are heirs to the tradition of quality, perfecting first-class terroirs day after day. The Billecarts know that tradition means little without the injection of new ideas: Witness their pioneering 1950s system of cold-settling of the fermenting wine to separate out the coarser lees for optimal finesse—hence this unique style of freshness, precision, and richness.

This seminar showed why the Brut Réserve is exceptional. It's made from 40% finest Meunier from a circle of chalkier Marne vineyards around

Leuvrigny, Festigny, and Damery, for joyful fragrant fruit, bolstered by the staying power of serious Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from top sites in Aÿ, Mareuil, Verzenay, and Ambonnay for Pinot Noir, Chouilly, Cramant, Avize, and Le Mesnil for Chardonnay. The latest cuvée is based on the outstanding 2012, maybe the best Pinot Noir year since 1952.

Antoine also spoke of his love of Chardonnay, as in the sprightly 2007 Sous Bois. The new vintage of the very fine Cuvée Elisabeth Salmon Rosé is the successor to the magnificent, seemingly eternal 2002, much admired by other great houses and growers. The 2006 is a faster-maturing vintage than the 2002, but both are blessed for Rosé, since Pinot Noir was specially ripe but also very fresh and fragrant. It's very interesting that two such different vintages could produce such special wine.

Above: Antoine Roland-Billecart in the house's winery.

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Billecart-Salmon Brut Réserve NV

(40% PM, 30% PN, 30% C; dosage 9g/l)

Fine, elegant straw color with light gold highlights. A great spectacle of filigreed lace-like bubbles, persistent but subtle. Fragrant aromas of apple blossom, with a hint of toasted brown bread.

Ripe pear and peach on the mouth-filling yet very elegant palate. The quality of the exceptional 2012 base-wine is striking. As good as it gets. | 95

Billecart-Salmon Extra-Brut NV

(Base wine 2011; zero dosage)

Pale gold, glistening, another fine mousse. A riot of flowers and pâtisserie scents, then a very, very dry palate, perhaps raising the question of whether there was quite enough fruit maturity in 2011 for this challenging style. | 89

As retasted in March at The Champagne Experience in London with 2012 as the base wine: much better maturity, definition, and length. | 93

Billecart-Salmon Sous Bois NV

Officially this is Non-Vintage, but it is in fact a pure 2007. Beautiful, radiant yellow; crystalline, superfine mousse; terrific fine lemon and orchard-fruit scents. The palate confirms, with a creamy texture but also a bracing vivaciousness. End notes of brioche, finely ripe. Chardonnay in charge. Virtuoso use of oak. | 95

Billecart-Salmon 2006 Cuvée Elisabeth Salmon Rosé

(50% PN, 50% C; dosage 6–7g/l)

Haunting, vivid, rose-petal hue with salmon lights and a hint of copper. Subtle, enveloping effervescence. A gorgeous mélange of redcurrant, strawberry, citrus, then fresh figs, peach, and (would you believe) macaroons. Ample, generous, a whiff of cedarwood. Exciting matches like saddle of veal, lobster Armoricaine, or poulet de Bresse aux morilles come to mind. | 95

Billecart-Salmon 1999 Clos St-Hilaire Extra-Brut (magnum)

(100% PN)

Splendid yellow-gold of great Pinot from the family's walled vineyard in Mareuil-sur-Aÿ. Powerful sensations of peach, plum, and quince bolstered by the white limestone and clay subsoil. Less structured complexity than the great 1998 but more evolved flavors of vanilla, mushrooms, and truffles. A manly wine for roast venison or Beaufort or a strong Maroilles. | 94

Billecart-Salmon 2002 Cuvée Nicolas François Billecart

Always the finest wine of the house and particularly special in the ever-youthful 2002, which has so much in reserve that it should age gracefully to 2030 or beyond: one of the greatest wines of a great year. Latent power, density without heaviness, supremely elegant, all finesse. With the best roast turbot on the bone, you couldn't wish for anything better. | 98