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The Busy Wine Lover's Guide to Philipponnat



© Philipponnat | *Philipponnat's best wines can age comfortably for 60 years and more.* The family-run Champagne house often runs below the radar, but offers some excellent wines, **Tom Hyland** discovers.

By Tom Hyland | Posted Tuesday, 19-Jul-2016

A family-run company

Philipponnat, a distinguished Champagne house located in the small town of Mareuil-sur-Ay, in the Vallée de la Marne, was founded in 1522, and is one of the few family-run houses remaining in [Champagne](#) (it is owned by the Lanson-BBC partnership). Charles Philipponnat, who belongs to the founding family, manages the firm on an everyday basis and takes great pride in his stewardship. "Being the head of a family-run Champagne house simply increases my sense of responsibility and makes me want to produce even better wines. It also makes me conscious of the long-scale time frame in which Champagne-making is framed, and of the fact that today's decisions will have effect not only on the current releases, but also the winery's success for many years and decades, especially regarding the planting of vines."

A singular vineyard

Of the 17 hectares (42 acres) of vines owned by the winery, the most important are the 5.5 (13.5 acres) that comprise Clos des Goisses, a vineyard situated only a few meters from the winery offices and cellars. Acquired by the winery in 1935, Philipponnat labels this cru as "a unique vineyard in Champagne".

Walking through the cru, it's easy to see why, as the slope ranges from 35° to 45° facing due south – it's one of the most beautiful vineyards in all of Champagne, reflected in the Marne shipping canal across the road. Philipponnat notes that it is one of the hottest vineyards in the region, resulting in "very ripe and expressive wines, with a very fresh, clean structure".

Longevity

One feature about the wines from Clos des Goisses is their great aging potential. The vineyard, like many in the area, has a pure chalky subsoil, which provides a distinct minerality in the finished products; according to Philipponnat: "Because of this mineral character, and also because of the absence of [malolactic fermentation](#), they [the wines] are also extremely long lived." While there are dozens of famous Champagnes throughout the region that drink well for two or even three decades, few examples from classic vintages such as 1964 and 1952 are still tasting beautifully.

A typical Clos des Goisses blend these days is 65 percent [Pinot Noir](#) and 35 percent [Chardonnay](#); Philipponnat notes the differences among the various vintages. "In the lighter vintages, such as 2004, you don't really get the full Clos des Goisses character. But in the sunny years, the big years [such as 2005 or 2000], Clos des Goisses is a very powerful wine."

For the newly-released 2006, a year Philipponnat describes as "relatively light, but a healthy and pure vintage", he recommends early drinking in 2017 or 2018, but suggests that "true Clos des Goisses aficionados will be well advised to exercise patience until 2026 at the least".

A winemaker's thoughts

Thierry Garnier has been the chef de caves at Philipponnat since 2005; he has strong opinions on why the wines of Clos de Goisses are so distinctive. For him, two of the most noticeable characteristics are the "unbelievable aromatic complexity" and the "exceptional cellaring potential – 20 years plus. These are true whatever

the vintage." He also notes that Clos des Goisses is produced every year, which is more or less, unique in Champagne. Quoting, he remarks: "As Burgundians say: 'You have to taste great [terroirs](#) in poor vintages – that is the difference.'"



© Philipponnat | *The Clos des Goisses vineyard, overlooking the Marne Canal, was acquired by the company in 1935.*

Other jewels from Clos des Goisses

Recently, the winery has released two new cuvées from the Clos des Goisses vineyard, a rosé labeled "Juste Rosé", along with "Les Cintres", made from a small section at the heart of this vineyard. The 2005 rosé is a blend of 64 percent Pinot Noir and 34 percent Chardonnay, with a dosage of 4.5 grams per liter (almost identical to the classic Clos des Goisses), putting this in the [extra brut](#) category. This is a seductive rosé, with expressive aromatics of mandarin orange, currant and Anjou pear. Philipponnat detects a note of papaya and says that "it's tropical, but in a light way". As the wine has a delicate color, the name Juste Rosé was chosen.

The 2006 Les Cintres is a blend of 70 percent Pinot Noir and 30 percent Chardonnay from one of the oldest sections of Clos des Goisses. Les Cintres means "the arches"; there is a small stone arch that marks this part of the vineyard. Aged for nine years at the cellars, this is a limited-production wine, with a total of 2065 bottles; compare that to 16,000 bottles of Clos des Goisses in a typical year. Philipponnat points out that Les Cintres existed before, but always as a part of the Clos des Goisses blend; his objective in releasing this wine "was to showcase what the best wines at the core of the Clos des Goisses offering tasted like unblended". He notes that ,while Chardonnay was incorporated into the initial 2006 cuvée, future releases will be entirely Pinot Noir.

Garnier considers Les Cintres a "one cuvée: one lot, one variety, one vintage and one Champagne house. It is very much the antithesis of Champagne, the kingdom of blending."

But wait! There's more

Philipponnat has also introduced other new cuvées over the past two years, most notably the Mareuil-sur-Ay bottling, and the Lé Léon offering, both vintage-dated wines, with the initial releases from the 2006 vintage. Both are 100 percent Pinot Noir, with the former produced from fruit sourced entirely from the Premier Cru village that is home to the firm, while the latter is from the eponymous single plot in the Grand Cru village of Ay, located only a few kilometers to the northwest. Aged for more than seven years on the lees, the Lé Léon displays pear and fig flavors with a light smokiness (45 percent of the wine was barrel fermented); quite rich on the palate with excellent persistence and superb complexity, it should drink well for 7-10 years.

Excellent value

While the Clos des Goisses and the new cuvées represent the apex of what Philipponnat is achieving today, the 1522 series wines are of remarkable quality, are more widely available, and are priced more humbly. The 1522 Brut from the 2006 vintage is a Pinot Noir-Chardonnay blend with the Pinot Noir sourced from the Lé Léon vineyard. Highlighted by a creamy mid-palate and a lengthy, harmonious finish, this is excellent value and a cuvée that flies under the radar at Philipponnat. It is a testament to the direction taken by Charles Philipponnat and wine that should, in the words of chef de caves Garnier, "remind Champagne lovers of the great potential we have".