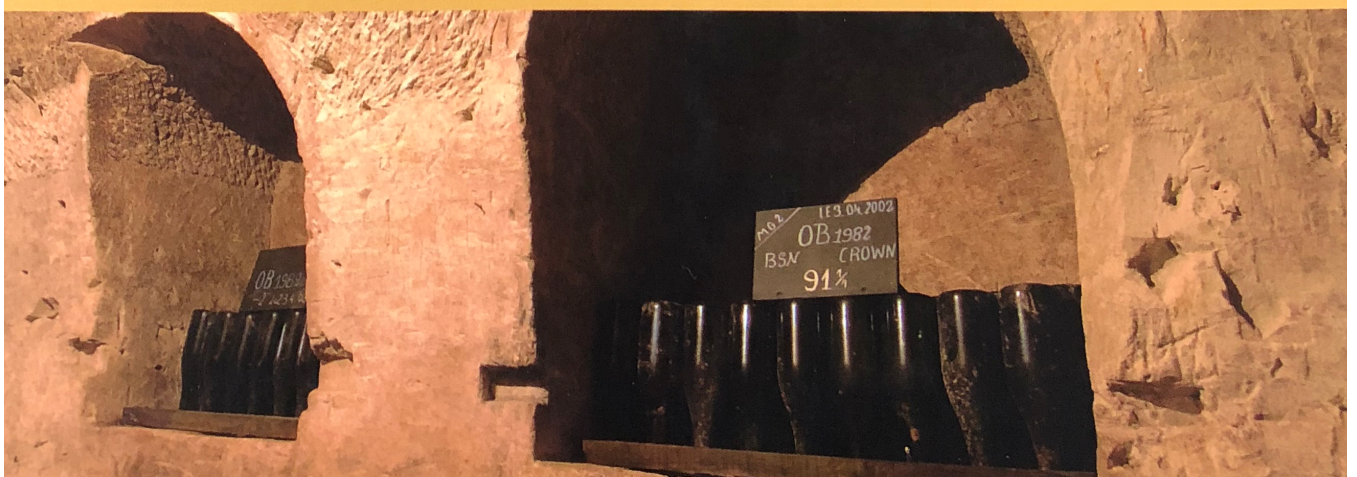




CHAMPAGNE

A TASTING JOURNEY

Kaaren Palmer



Chapter Thirty Five

SMALL BUT PERFECTLY FORMED – 'THE GROWERS' KRUG'

*Too much of anything is bad, but too much
champagne is just right.*

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Often the first introduction to a winemaker, or a winemaking style, is found through a wine journal or book. It's easy to ignore a suggestion or two, but when there is an avalanche of approval for a maker, curiosity overtakes the reader and investigation is demanded. Here is a sample of the praise given to Vilmart & Cie's wines.

Specialist sparkling wine writer, Tom Stevenson, MW:

'Vilmart (Rilly-la-Montagne) is without doubt one of the greatest grower estates in Champagne ... an immaculately managed property ...'³⁵⁶

'Vilmart is the greatest grower Champagne I know ... the Vilmart range begins at brilliant and just keeps getting better.'³⁵⁷

'... after it [Vilmart] introduced oak in the 1980s, [the wines became] "poor man's Krug" and "mini Krug".'³⁵⁸

Simon Field, MW, buyer for Berry Bros and Rudd, one of Britain's longest-established wine businesses (1698), and holder of two Royal Warrants:

'... a very assured and gifted winemaker, a visionary in the mould of his close friend, Anselme Selosse ... These wines are neither over-made, nor mediocre. Instead they represent some of the best examples to come from the Montagne de Reims; the well-named *Cœur de Cuvée* is now one of the most sought-after of all champagnes ...'³⁵⁹

*Dr Philipp Blom, wine writer*³⁶⁰

'Nowhere else did I find such crystal-clear fruit, perfectly poised and with such great depth. The small House of Vilmart & Cie is one of the region's best-kept secrets.'

Richard Juhlin, champagne specialist, awarded the Legion of Honour by the French government for his work on champagne and other wines of France:

'[Vilmart] ... one of the true gems with the perfect wine, *Cœur de Cuvée*, as its most brilliant star ...'³⁶¹

Respected American wine writer, Antonio Galloni:

'... these are majestic wines that no one who loves fine champagne will want to be without.'³⁶²

Fascination sparked by such accolades led to investigation, beginning with a visit to the winery, a long talk with the vigneron, and the purchase of many bottles of Vilmart from vintages not known for their brilliance ...

Desiré Vilmart was born in 1850 in Rilly-la-Montagne, a small village close to Reims. The family's vineyard consisted of somewhere between four and five hectares at a nearby village, Chigny-les-Roses. There, Desiré, a labourer-cum-winegrower, began working in 1872, three years before the birth of his son, Charles. Desiré pressed the grapes in the family's press, and created both still and sparkling wines. By 1890 he was marketing his wines under the Vilmart brand, for direct sales to private customers and to restaurants in France. As a result he was able to provide a viticultural and commercial education for his son.

On completion of his studies, Charles Vilmart was so determined to improve his schoolboy English – so that he could negotiate an export market in Britain for the family – that he arranged a loan from the Crédit Agricole bank in Reims to finance a study trip to England before assuming full responsibility for the business in 1902, when he was twenty-seven. Around this time the family suffered, along with countless others, from the devastating effects of phylloxera and poor harvests, but they persisted in winemaking nonetheless and by 1910, no doubt triggered by inheritance issues as a result of Desiré's death, had relinquished their Chigny vineyards for some hectares on the outskirts of Rilly-la-Montagne, where winemaker Laurent Champs now lives.

Rilly-la-Montagne, a village on the northern side of the Montagne de Reims, enjoys an average altitude of 160 metres where the slopes begin their descent to Reims, not too far east of the main road connecting Épernay and Reims. The littoral dunes which eons ago bordered a great lake have aged into calcareous sandstone on which rest topsoils of chalky clay.³⁶³



Charles Vilmart married Thérèse Leroux from the next village, Chigny-les-Roses

Charles, though surviving the stresses of war going on around him, did not live beyond sixty. But

his business was sufficiently rewarding that he could send his three sons to the good agricultural and viticultural school in Beaune, more than 300 kilometres south of Champagne, where the two of them excelled. Marceau, who died young, was placed first in the class of 22 students, and Renan, when in his late teens, was awarded third place for his first and second years' work. It gave great pride to the family when the results were reported in the local newspaper.³⁶⁴ Further good news for them was that their vineyards were classified at 88 per cent *échelle des crus* in the post-World War I official classification.³⁶⁵

By 1930 Renan Vilmart, grandfather of the current generation, had done much with his youthful energy to establish the Vilmart champagnes' reputation locally, and took the opportunity of the 1930s depression to extend the family's vineyard holdings. The Second World War presented a further challenge. Renan was fortunate to own a charcoal-powered vehicle that he used – until he was mobilised – to make essential food deliveries throughout the neighbourhood, in the spirit of great fraternity fostered by the declaration of war on Germany in 1939 and the subsequent Occupation in 1940. His

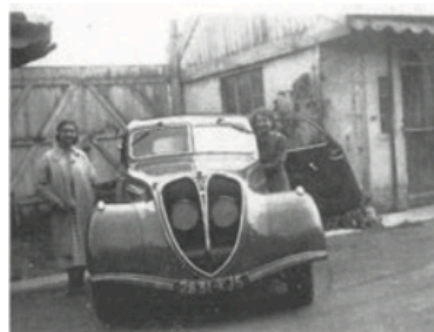


Never forgetting the sight of Reims' fiery destruction, and grateful to have escaped, all the Vilmart men contributed to building the 1914–18 war memorial

brother Galilée, who had been conscripted, was captured and sent to Germany, not to return until after the war.

In the meantime, the Vilmart women managed the vineyards and winemaking as best they could, with limited resources. Unluckily, the construction by the Germans of a long-range launch pad in the area, plus their bombs stored in Rilly's railway tunnel, proved targets for British and American bombers at the end of the war: the houses and surroundings of Rilly-la-Montagne, including Vilmart's vineyards and premises, were destroyed. Once again, the resilience of the Champenois was epitomised by the speed with which the vineyards were replanted afterwards and the buildings made good. There was time for Renan to found a local society to discuss viticultural practices and exchange ideas about improving winemaking, while in 1949 he became one of the seven founding members of the rather exclusive Palmer co-operative, while continuing the business selling his family wines.

Renan's daughter, Nicole, was born into Occupied France in 1944. She married a man of the soil, in close touch with the land and an employee of her father, René Champs. Seven years her senior, he had ideas about how a vineyard should be worked: as naturally as possible, with minimal use of modern chemicals and with grasses grown between the rows of vines to compete with them and coax their roots to drive deep into the chalk. Removing bad weeds with a hoe had the excellent side effect of aerating the soil, while micro-organic life was encouraged by the sparing use of specially



The women ran the place, and drove the car, while Renan fought for his country

prepared organic manures. Champs composed them with a mixture which included hardwood bark to help break up the clay topsoil crust, soft bark, animal manure and the local peat-derived lignite to supply the iron required to prevent yellowing of the vines leaves.³⁶⁶ To Champs, the life of the soil was a prime consideration. Additionally, he introduced hard pruning in winter to reduce yields and careful trimming of the vine canopy during the growing season to optimise the grapes' exposure to light and warmth. These early leanings to biodynamic and organic viticultural practices were rewarded with very high-quality fruit.

In 1962 Renan retired and the next generation found themselves in full control of the business. Nicole and René's son Laurent was born in 1968. Laurent's grandfather took especial care to instil in him a passion for the earth and its vines, and the importance of close watchfulness – at harvest, with pressing and for the first racking. The boy helped to lift the wires to guide growing vines, tied pruned canes to the guiding wires and removed undesirable grasses. Like all young people, he had dreams that instead of following in his father's footsteps, he might perhaps become a pianist or a sports writer. But he pursued his education with six years at the well-respected Lycée Viticole in Avize, where two gifted teachers inspired him. His imagination was captured by trips to other wine regions of France, where he discovered wood was the only material used for fermentation. School was followed by a year studying marketing at the Chamber of Commerce in Reims, then a year of military service.

René Champs always impressed on Laurent the necessity to forge a path outside the standard responses, to do things differently in order to create an individual voice with the Vilmart expression of champagne. For example, when the bountiful harvest of 1970 prompted many local vigneronns to move to large stainless steel tanks to make the most of the opportunity, René had raised his neighbours'



The Vilmart home and winery – destroyed

eyebrows by investing in four new 50 hl wooden casks to add to his *demi-muids* and champagne barrels. René's work to improve the grapes' quality through organic practices was also recognised in due course, the vineyards being classified upwards, Rilly-la-Montagne to 94 per cent and the family's 1970 acquisition at Villers-Allerand to 90 per cent.

Laurent's first year in the family business, 1990, was exciting. He decided to try some new oak barrels, which imparted decidedly woody tones to the top cuvées after ten months of ageing following fermentation. It was a bold move that brought considerable attention to the Vilmart champagnes – not all of it complimentary. Laurent's learning curve was steep indeed. Nor was it always easy for him to work with the older generation, and the thought did cross Laurent's mind that perhaps he would move away, begin a new life elsewhere – perhaps to a pizzeria in the south of France. But instead he concentrated on improving the Vilmart brand's identity.

His next venture was to begin exporting and he visited England with his car stocked with Vilmart champagnes; unfortunately this effort resulted in a large bad debt. Success followed the appointment of an exclusive agent in England and gradually Vilmart became marketed in 35 countries all over the world. Today, 70 per cent of its production is sold outside France. Time on cork also toned down the explicit oakiness of Laurent's early champagnes, and these wines are now regarded as among the very best of those vintages.

Vilmart is a long-term member – one of only a handful of Champenois vigneron – of AMPELOS, an organisation with a strict code promoting organic and sustainable viticulture.³⁶⁷ The accreditation is very formal, with control, traceability and regular audits being part of the process. Vilmart has achieved Level Three, the highest level of certification, for compliance with sustainable viticultural and winemaking practices including management of fertilizer, water and waste, and the encouragement of bio-diversity. At Vilmart no herbicide or insecticide is used, just the natural grassing between the rows, while ploughing aerates the soil and ensures the correct amount of competition between grass and vine.



A controversial purchase became a wise investment

Vilmart has a strict code promoting organic and sustainable viticulture



Laurent Champs – fanatical about vineyard care

The Vilmart estate consists of 11 hectares of vines spread across 12 parcels in the premier cru communes of Villers-Allerand and Rilly-la-Montagne. ‘Les Bermonts’ has a northerly aspect, while the largest vineyard is the beautiful four-hectare ‘Les Blanches Voies’ *lieu-dit*, which slopes southwards towards Rilly-la-Montagne. Yields are low for the old vines, 6000–9000 kilograms per hectare, depending on the season, rising to 12,000–14,000 kilograms per hectare for the young vines.

Surprisingly, neither Villers-Allerand nor Rilly-la-Montagne are known for Chardonnay at all. In fact, fewer than a quarter of these communes’ vineyards are dedicated to the variety, but Vilmart succeeds where those with fainter hearts fear to go. Laurent’s forebears passed on the knowledge that the family’s best sites, situated on pure chalk under a mere 40 centimetres of topsoil, have perfect drainage and produce excellent Chardonnay which, after vinification, expresses itself with fruit, flavour and structure, combined with excellent balancing acidity.

In total, the Vilmart holding comprises 60 per cent Chardonnay and 40 per cent Pinot Noir, propagated partly by *massale* selection in the oldest vineyard, and partly from new vines from the local nursery. Laurent has also bought high-quality, low-yield clones for maximising flavour potential in the future, but which coincidentally are not so sensitive to rot as some other clones – yet another indication that this winemaker is resolutely seeking his own way in Champagne.

While an official harvest date is declared for each grape variety by the CIVC, Laurent Champs often begins his ten long days of picking and pressing a day or two later than allowed, in order to ensure fruit of full ripeness. The oldest vines are picked first, the bunches gently being gathered in hand baskets by a team of thirty experienced people who hurry the fruit to the old Coquard press for immediate

processing. The press gently crushes the grapes over a four-hour period, each parcel separately, with a *retrousse*, breaking up of the compacted grapes, after the first pressing. The juice decants slowly, using gravity, into scrupulously clean tile-lined tanks, where it is settled for 24 hours before being softly pumped, using a peristaltic movement, into old 30–50 hectolitre *foudres* for the non-vintage, Grande Réserve, Grand Cellier and Cuvée Rubis champagnes, and into Bordeaux barrels (225 litres) for vintage champagne. There, the juice begins fermentation with natural yeasts before additional selected yeast is added to ensure a full and successful fermentation over 8–10 days. Afterwards, all barrels are topped up.

There is no malolactic fermentation at Vilmart, which makes all its wines particularly age-worthy, with great freshness, flavour, finesse and fruit purity. The wine rests on its heavy lees for a month before being strained with its fine lees into cleaned barrels for a further ten months' ageing and micro-oxygenation. The barrels are a year old before they come into the system, and are then used for six subsequent years before being retired. Because of the natural richness and finesse of the still wines, *bâtonnage* is not required although Laurent, of course, reserves the right for future experimentation. After use, the barrels are cleaned to remove traces of yeast and tartrates, ready for the next harvest.

In July following the harvest, after light fining with a natural product and filtering, the wines are blended and bottled for secondary fermentation.³⁶⁸ All wines then rest on their yeast lees for much longer than the regulation minimum: 2–4 years for the non-vintage and 5–6 years for vintage wines. Dosage liqueur is cane sugar mixed with a special reserve of the best cuvées, 'Cœur de Cuvée' and



‘Grand Cellier’, aged in old, small *foudres* of 18 hectolitres, the same storage as for reserve wines. Six months to a year after dosage, the wines are released.

Today, Vilmar’s wine library contains a few champagnes from the two prior generations plus, rather incongruously, a Cassis Cream from before the Second World War. The wines from the current generation are well represented – ‘Cœur de Cuvée’ onwards since 1989. Waiting in the darkness nearby is something for later – a Vilmar Blanc de Blancs from 2009.

Laurent Champs tells me he agrees with the movement promoting disgorgement dates on labels. ‘And global warming?’ I ask. ‘It has helped Champagne a lot,’ he replies, ‘in that spring frosts are now largely avoided and, on average, the harvests are earlier.’

Of the thousands of small vigneron in Champagne, Laurent Champs at Vilmar is a very special Récoltant Manipulant, who has forged a lone path now being followed by others: organic and biodynamic farming, and the use of oak. Experience, thoughtfulness and time have honed and refined his skills to a pitch of finesse with Vilmar’s top cuvées. The Pinot Noir–dominant Grande Réserve, while less complex than ‘Cœur de Cuvée’ or Grand Cellier, is both immediately drinkable and cellarable. The whole range ages beautifully.

Chapter 33 discussed the effect of wood, something to bear in mind when assessing these champagnes. Now it is time to judge for yourself whether the praises heaped on Vilmar, recounted at the beginning of the chapter, are justified.

GUIDED TASTING

SMALL BUT PERFECTLY FORMED – ‘THE GROWERS’ KRUG’

The Vilmar signature – well structured with complex aromas, ample richness, generous fruitiness, freshness and length – distinguishes all its wines. A lone imbibitor should try a bottle from the middle of the list for a proper introduction to this House’s style. Note that the ‘Cœur de Cuvée’ Vintage should be opened to allow aeration in advance of tasting.

- » Vilmar Grande Réserve NV
- » Vilmar ‘Grand Cellier’ NV
- » Vilmar ‘Grand Cellier d’Or’ Vintage

Vilmar ‘Cœur de Cuvée’ Vintage

Vilmar ‘Cuvée Rubis’ NV

Describe the champagnes in the usual manner, covering appearance, aromas, palate and the influence of wood.

If you were to group the champagnes into style families, how would you do that? (Hint: the grape composition will give you a clue.)

Vilmar Grande Réserve NV

30% Chardonnay, 70% Pinot Noir

A blend of two years (25–50% reserve wines), fermented and aged for ten months in large oak barrels; no malolactic fermentation, minimum 3–4 years on lees. This and the rosé are Vilmar’s only Pinot-dominant cuvées. Dosage is year dependent.



In retirement René Champs remains an artisan, having moved from vines to stained glass, both requiring care and patience.

Vilmart 'Grand Cellier' NV

70% Chardonnay, 30% Pinot Noir

The grapes are selected from Les Hautes Grèves and Les Basses Grèves *lieux-dits* in Rilly-la-Montagne). A blend of three years (50% reserve wines), fermented and aged for ten months in large old oak barrels; no malolactic fermentation, minimum 3–4 years on lees. Dosage year dependent.

Vilmart 'Grand Cellier d'Or' Vintage

80% Chardonnay, 20% Pinot Noir

Grapes from the same *lieux-dits* as above, but selected from older vines than the 'Grand Cellier' NV. Fermented then aged for ten months, a third in five-year-old small barrels, a third in six-year-old barrels, a third in seven-year-old barrels; no malolactic fermentation, 5–7 years on lees. Dosage year dependent.



Vilmart 'Cœur de Cuvée' Vintage

80% Chardonnay, 20% Pinot Noir

Choicest grapes are selected from the *lieu-dit* 'Blanches Voies' ('White Tracks'), where Vilmart's vines are well in excess of 50 years old. 4000 kg of grapes are pressed, which would normally yield 2050 litres of juice, but only 800 litres of the juice is reserved from the middle of the pressing (the heart of the *cuvée*) to make this champagne. Fermented, then aged for ten months, a third in two-year-old small barrels, a third in three-year-old barrels, a third in four-year-old barrels; no malolactic fermentation, 5–7 years on lees. Dosage year dependent.

The 'Cœur de Cuvée' has been one of Champagne's cult wines since Tom Stevenson pronounced the 1991 'one of the three greatest champagnes made in the last 25 years'. The difficult 2001 vintage also received the highest praise, as did the acclaimed 2002. Cellaring for at least three years is recommended.



René Champs, father of Laurent, considers his degustation

Vilmart 'Cuvée Rubis'

10% Chardonnay, 90% Pinot Noir

Vinified as red wine (*saignée*); a blend of two harvests fermented and aged in large *foudres*; no malolactic fermentation, 3 years on lees. Dosage is year dependent.



333. Tom Stevenson, *Oak in Champagne*, p. 3. Georges Hardy, 'La Vinification Champenoise et L'Elaboration du champagne', in *Champagne, Le Vin Secret*, ed. Richard Marchal, p. 226.
334. Forbes, op. cit., p. 301.
335. François Bonal, *Livre d'Or de Champagne*, <http://maisons-champagne.com/fr/encyclopedies/histoire-du-champagne/premiere-partie-histoire-du-champagne/chapitre-5-le-xxe-siecle/article/le-temps-de-l-epanouissement>
336. Bollinger, *Life Can Be Perfect*, p. 157.
337. Andrew L. Waterhouse et al., op. cit., p. 193.
338. Mathieu Kauffman, quoted in *The Drinks Business* magazine by Patrick Schmitt 24th August 2012.
339. *ibid.*, p. 63. Bollinger, as reported by Jolanta Smiciene for Richard Juhlin, <http://www.champagneclub.com/en/note/2012/Jolanta%20Smiciene.aspx>, June 2012. Tom Stevenson, *Oak in Champagne*, Tom Cannavan's www.wine-pages.com 18/6/2010, p. 4. Bollinger, *Life Can Be Perfect*, p. 209.
340. Stelzer, *The Champagne Guide 2014–2015*, p. 275.
341. Nicholas Faith, p. 179.
342. Ben Rotter, 'Improved Winemaking' blog on Malolactic Fermentation, <http://www.brsquared.org/wine/Articles/MLF/MLF.htm>
343. Ben Rotter, 'Improved Winemaking' blog on *Sur lie and bâtonnage* (Lees contact and stirring), <http://www.brsquared.org/wine/Articles/surlie/surlie.htm>
344. Bollinger, *Life Can Be Perfect*, p. 209.
345. Tyson Stelzer, *The Champagne Guide 2014–15*, p. 676.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

346. Alsace was occupied by troops from Great Britain, Russia, Prussia and Austria, among other countries, allied under the command of the Duke of Wellington. See Thomas Dwight Veve (1992), *The Duke of Wellington and the British army of occupation in France, 1815–1818*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, pp. 20–1.
347. Eric Glatre, *Chronique des Vins de Champagne*, Editions Castor & Pollux, Chassigny, France, 2005, pp. 97, 100–101, 152, 158.
348. Robert Tomes, *The Champagne Country*, 1867, p. 69.
349. Journal des Notaires et des Avocats, par un société des jurisconsultes et de notaires, 1^{er} semestre, Art. 8304, Paris, 1835, pp. 97–305.
350. Eugène became a partner in 1845.
351. Hugues Krafft reputedly spoke six languages including, crucially, Russian. His mother was of the famous Champagne Mumm family.
352. At the time of his death, Louis Roederer II owned one of the greatest collections after 'Chantilly, the most important and the richest in France'. J. de Sainte-André, *Les Grandes Usines de Turgan*, Administration des Grandes Usines, Paris, 1892, p. 52.
353. *Veraison* is the final phase of ripening.
354. *L'Officiel* magazine of Louis Roederer, no. 12, p. 12.

355. 'aroma and expression', Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon, cellar master, comments in *L'Officiel* magazine of Louis Roederer, no. 12, p. 11.

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

356. <http://www.wine-searcher.com/m/2014/01/tom-stevenson-s-best-grower-champagnes>. 21 January, 2014.
357. *Decanter*, 30 May 2007.
358. *ibid.*, 30 May, 2007.
359. <http://www.bbr.com/producer-1785-champagne-vilmart-and-cie>
360. *Decanter*, 1 January 2001
361. Richard Juhlin, *4000 Champagnes*, op. cit., p. 363.
362. Antonio Galloni, American wine critic, who famously worked with Robert Parker 2006–13, in *The Wine Advocate* #186, December 2009.
363. Geoffrey Orban, *Champagne Le Vin Secret*, p. 85.
364. *Courrier de la Champagne, Journal de Reims*, 19th August 1921, second page.
365. André L. Simon, *The History of Champagne*, p. 25.
366. James E. Wilson, *Terroir: the role of geology, climate and culture in the making of French wines*, op. cit., p. 69.
367. AMPELOS was founded in 1999 by a group of highly qualified viticultural consultants strongly committed to sustainable viticulture. It is based on a very strictly documented set of procedures, which are audited and inspected annually. To receive AMPELOS accreditation, the vine grower must comply in all areas: soil care, planting, fertilisation, management methods and vineyard protection.
368. Isinglass, a by-product of fish, is used for fining.
369. Forbes, op. cit., p. 131.

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

370. Patrick Gmeline, *Ruinart: The oldest producer of champagne*, Editions Stock, Paris, 1996, pp. 10–14.
371. Thomas Brennan, *Burgundy to Champagne: The Wine Trade in Early Modern France*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1997, p. 49.
372. Jean Gosset appears in history as feudal lord of Aÿ in 1531, his son Claude as a vigneron in 1555. Gosset is the longest-established wine producer of Champagne, and can trace its vinous roots in Aÿ to 1584 when Pierre Gosset was Mayor (1584–92) and wine seller. One of his visitors was King Henri IV. There is no firm date for when Gosset first produced champagne, but it is thought by the people at Gosset to be about the beginning of the twentieth century.
373. Brennan, op. cit., p. 265.
374. Gmeline, op. cit., p. 24.
375. Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, Collection Joly, ms. 1336, fol. 270, letter from Collet, 4 March 1739.
376. Gmeline, op. cit., p. 34.
377. *La Revue du Champagne*, no. 29, Semestriel Juin 2004 ISSN 1151-3454, p. 44. Author not attributed.
378. Reported 10/8/1772 in the Archives of the Marne.
379. Claude Taittinger, *Champagne by Taittinger*, p. 77.