

A large, vertical, stainless steel wine barrel is the central focus of the image. It has a circular hatch near the bottom with a metal handle. Several valves with handles are attached to the barrel, some with small chains. The barrel is situated in a cellar with a tiled floor and concrete walls. A blue text box is overlaid on the left side of the barrel.

Terry Theise Estate Selections

**CHAMPAGNE** 2015



# VILMART & CIE



## REGION / SUB REGION

Montagne de Reims / Rilly-la-Montagne

## VINEYARD AREA

11 hectares

## ANNUAL PRODUCTION

9,000 cases

## VILLAGES AND SOIL TYPES

Rilly-la-Montagne 1er Cru,  
Villers-Allerand 1er Cru  
(calcareous clay and limestone)

## GRAPE VARIETIES

60% Chardonnay  
36% Pinot Noir  
4% Meunier

## AMPELOS CERTIFICATION

lutte raisonnée

## AT A GLANCE

*Wood-aged base wines give these Champagnes distinctly mealy and Burgundian flavors. They're often described as the best grower in Champagne or "the poor man's Krug." Vilmar's wines can offer a resonance and majesty unique among small estates.*

## HOW THE WINES TASTE

*At best, Vilmar's wines are grandiose and resplendent. With sufficient bottle age these can take you up and up into rare altitudes of complexity. Even at ground-level they've got lots of flavor, as though the flavors were stated in BOLD CAPS. A further key to quality is the large proportion of pre-clonal Chardonnay vines. "These grapes are yellower than those from clonal vines," says Laurent. "And they have an incredible Muscat aroma." And Laurent, like every great producer, has a wife who says he's "a maniac for his vineyards."*

At one point we stood in Laurent's new treasure-room in the cellar, tasting a few wines he'd let us select. I wanted to taste unremarkable wines, to satisfy my curiosity. But there's nothing at Vilmar that isn't remarkable, as I ought to have known.

We were four people, standing shoulder to shoulder across a small table, and as the wines proceeded I felt a kind of intimacy settle over the room, the kind that children feel when they're hiding from someone. Perhaps we were hiding from the quotidian world outside, drinking a friend's old wine, enveloped in gratitude and happiness.

As I arrive at Vilmar, I find I have a feeling of anticipation and pleasure similar to the feeling of arriving at Dönnhoff. Not only will the wines be beautiful, but I'll be breathing my own air. Laurent Champs' wines have reached the level of making-it-look-easy, the lit-from-within-ness and serenity of that lapidary style so few wines have. I feel at home here.

It's not that the wines are always calm and serene. Sometimes they're frisky and even hyper—like the crazy-good 2004 vintage. But they offer the flavor of homecoming, the flavor of belonging, the silent harbor of welcome. And even when they're animated they're never flirtatious, because in order to be coquettish or seductive you also have to be arch. And Laurent's wines already accept you. They are loving.

Peter Liem writes: "Vilmar & Cie. is not only one of the greatest grower-estates in Champagne, but one of the finest champagne producers of any type in the region."

There is a larger existential meaning to Vilmar, having to do with the circumstances of Laurent's father's life and the way these things have ramified for Laurent and for his wines. There is a gleam about them that isn't accidental. And without getting into the silly business of who the "best" grower is, I'll let myself say that no grower in Champagne is more significant than Vilmar, and that the wines, which were already remarkable, have become almost uniformly beautiful.

*Beautiful* is a word we seldom hear in winespeak. I can't really say why. It might be similar to the absence of the word "delicious" in most published tasting notes.

We seem to approach wine as if it were a sudoku puzzle we had to solve by grasping at it with our intellects. Alternately, when we respond spontaneously and sensually, the emotions can't help but engage. There are plenty of impressive wines and even *exciting* wines that aren't necessarily beautiful. Some of the wines that certain tasters describe as "hedonistic" are merely gaudy and lurid. Beauty seems like a prerequisite for profundity, and I mean *true* profundity, not just the affect of significance by virtue of mere power. I promise you, if you vowed to start thinking about wine in terms of its beauty, even for just a day (or to humor me), you'd find yourself starting over. Most of what you know—or "know"—won't at all be useful.

When I reached the end of a tasting with Laurent I felt as beauty often makes me feel, the presence of a certain silence. You notice the ever-present thrum is absent, the grinding background buzz of just coping. The wine in your glass is a psalm. Everything everyone says is wonderful. You feel actually pretty dopey, melting away like you are. You hardly feel you have to speak.

It's clear to me Vilmart is a Champagne estate of unassailable consequence, a must-have for anyone interested in the possibilities of this most suavely powerful and graceful of all wines. Casks are hardly the point anymore. Organic viticulture, (truly!) low yields, remarkable polish of fruit, and the deliberate patient pursuit

of a vision of perfection make Laurent Champs' estate a gemstone gleaming among the chalk.

I've written a lot here, and I respect that you need to know whatever may be *decisive* for you to buy or not. I get that. But I in turn need to know something. I need to know that you too are able to pause just enough to remember that feelings and history and culture and meanings orbit every single wine, and when we remember that, we bring more of ourselves to the lip of the glass. Other than being a decent habit of living, you'll find that if you can do this, you'll have a stay against burnout. It becomes a well you can drink from when you're feeling parched, and the water will always be clean and cold.

## SOME NOTES ON THE CUVÉES

**GRAND CELLIER** is not the regular NV Brut, but rather a superior NV or, seen from the other angle, the least among the luxury-cuvées.

**GRAND CELLIER D'OR** is the regular vintage wine, majority Chardonnay, from older vines, half aged in foudre and half in barrique.

**COEUR DE CUVÉE** is from the very oldest vines (all above 50 yrs.), 100% barrique aged, 80% Chardonnay and 20% Pinot Noir. There seems to be some confusion about the age of the barriques used, arising perhaps by Laurent's sensible policy of letting the vintage decide. In any case, some of the oak will be new and some of it won't.

### Vilmart & Cie "Grand Cellier" Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KVM-1

This wine is in an "interesting" phase right now, based on the vintages in play: in this case 2012 (50%) and the other half equally divided between '11 and '10. There's a dysphasia of ripeness, one might say. Disgorged 6/2014, the wine is dynamically angular with the 11-flavor no more than a nuance; the interplay is vivid, and tasting from the Jamesse glass it's almost exaggeratedly salty. It's better than last year's cuvée (which we tasted again), and next year's will be better still.

**A note on the stemware** – the superb sommelier at Les Crayères, Philippe Jamesse, has designed the perfect glass from which to drink Champagne *in the restaurant*, because it makes every wine seductive and almost emphatically fruit-forward and flavorful. It is not, in my opinion, an ideal *tasting* glass for those very reasons. At Vilmart we now taste each wine from two different glasses, the other one being the tall very wide flutes from Richard Juhlin, which I like very much, and which are obscenely expensive. Those glasses give you *enough* hedonism but they also encourage detailed analysis as they deconstruct the wine's structures and encourage minerality.

### Vilmart & Cie "Grand Cellier D'Or" Brut, 2010

12/750ml | KVM-610

+ +

Oh man: yes yes yes! This takes the sinewy profile of 2010 and uses it to stir these flavors with steel; insanely vivid and incisive; wonderful from both glasses but especially the Juhlin, where its stiletto attack is even better integrated; whippy and tight but sexy and feline; like drinking Champagne with a lynx. Never had anything like this. Deg 3/2014