

# Champagnes flying under the radar

MAR 20, 2018 By **HUON HOOKE** In **NEW AND NOTEWORTHY**

The wines of **Pierre Péters** and **Vilmart** are some of Champagne's finest, although not its best known. Indeed, most Australians probably had not heard of Vilmart until several years ago when English specialist Champagne writer Tom Stevenson began shouting it from the rooftops.

Vilmart does not even rate a mention in Aussie Tyson Stelzer's otherwise excellent biennial book, *The Champagne Guide 2018-19* (it was in previous editions, though).

Yet **Prince Wine Store** has been importing both since 2006. The retailer hosted both houses in Australia in mid-February, which was a wonderful indulgence for Prince customers. Rodolphe Péters, vigneron of Pierre Péters and Laurent Champs, president director general of Vilmart & Co, hosted tastings and dinners in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane.

There is no shortage of published detail about the methods of both houses. Stelzer's book rhapsodises about Rodolphe Péters' scrupulous attention to detail, his innovative vinification, his unique way of blending his vins de réserve, the extra-thin topsoil over chalk in his vineyards, and his flagship wine, Les Chétilons, "the Montrachet of Le Mesnil". And I came away with a thick folder of paperwork on Vilmart, including a copy of an exhaustive chapter from Kaaren Palmer's book *Champagne, A Tasting Journey*, which describes Vilmart as "the growers' Krug, small but perfectly formed."

However, there is no substitute for tasting the wines, and they were outstanding. And, happily, outstanding in contrasting ways. Pierre Péters is in the Côte des Blancs, specifically, the great village of Le Mesnil Sur Oger. So, pure chardonnay or blanc de blancs wines – except for the Rosé d'Albane. They have 19 hectares of vines. They use no oak, except for components of the reserve wine.


Vilmart is on the Montagne de Reims, pinot noir country, in a little village called Rilly-la-Montagne. They have 11 hectares of vines (60% chardonnay, 40% pinot noir) and produce about 9,000 cases a year. All primary fermentation is in oak, and they withhold the malolactic fermentation. Both producers pride themselves on low dosage levels, and all Pierre Péters wines are extra brut.

Predictably, the wines that wowed me most were either in very short supply and quite expensive, or not available at all. But, it was an experience to taste them.

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I especially loved the concentration and piercing intensity of the Vilmart style, with crunchy acidity and the extra complexity imparted by barrel fermentation and pinot noir. The rosé, **Grand Cellier Rubis 2011** (not available), was amazing as was the **NV Cuvée Rubis Brut 1er cru** (AUD \$140). The **Coeur de Cuvée 2008** was my highest rated wine of all (N/A), while the **Grand Cellier D'Or 2012** (N/A) also thrilled ahead of the very racy **Grand Cellier NV** (AUD \$130). And Vilmart's **Grande Réserve NV** (AUD \$100) is an excellent entry-level wine with baked-apple and peachy richness shot through by vibrant acidity.

For Pierre Péters, the **2012 l'Esprit Millesime** (AUD \$135) was superb, although the **2008 Les Chétillons** (AUD \$250) was truly sublime, multi-faceted with roast hazelnut and measured sherry-like aldehyde complexities.

The **L'Étonnant Monsieur Victor, Edition Mk 10 NV** (AUD \$465) is more about finesse and chalky minerality than brute power, while the pale-pink **Cuvée Rosé d'Albane NV** (AUD \$105) was predictably more pinoty and nougat-like with some Cumières and Damery pinot meunier in the mix.

Wines like these remind me of the saying that great Champagne is first and foremost great wine, the fact that it has bubbles is almost incidental.

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