

NON-VINTAGE CHAMPAGNE

Assessing wines when knowing the identities of same is always fraught with the peril of bias. It's very obvious that some reviewers occasionally pull an extra ten points out of the hat for pet wines, and they are very likely to do so for famous champagnes. Would they rate a wine from an unfashionable house and area ahead of those from prestigious and very hospitable producers? You can be the judge of that when you read reviews elsewhere.

What is non-vintage champagne? Obviously vintage champagne is made from base material of a single year, but non-vintage champagne is very much a composition straight from the artists' palettes. At its most simple, non-vintage champagne is a blend of young wines from more than one year, and is aged for 15 months. There's a veritable ocean of examples made this way. At best, they're fresh, simple, uninspiring. At the other end of the scale, they're profound and complex, reflecting older base material – and often under-rated by the brand-conscious.

Generally speaking, non-vintage champagne is slightly sweeter than vintage, and some nudge the 12.0 gm/litre sugar at the upper limit of Brut. However, there are many that are quite dry, and any labelled "Extra Brut" are required to be below 6.0 gm/litre sugar.

The Winewise motto is "It's what's in the glass that counts." To hell with labels. Here's how I saw these wines at "Taste Champagne" in Sydney.



Devaux Cuvée D This intriguing champagne is fresh and complex, possessing power, length, balance and creaminess. The finish is long and dry, and the palate has ideal structural phenolics. Plenty of work and thought has gone into this cuvée. Fermentation in stainless steel and oak, both large and small format, and storage of reserves for about five years are part of the Devaux method. A solera system, dating back over a decade, is also maintained for reserve wine. (\$89.50) ★★★★★
<http://www.yarrabankwines.com/store/>

Louis Roederer Brut Premier Impressive freshness combines beautifully with subtle fruit and bready autolysis aromas. The palate is rich, creamy and vibrant, with a dosage that is neither too sweet nor too dry. Reserves are held in large oak for 5-10 years. (\$65.00) ★★★★★
<http://www.winestar.com.au/roederer-brut-premier-nv>

Billecart-Salmon Brut Réserve Quite perfumed (showing pinot meunier) and vibrant, with a subtle brioche-like autolysis input. Very impressive, long, dry and balanced. (\$58.00) ★★★★★
<http://www.jimscellars.com.au>

Pol Roger Brut Réserve When champagne is in the minds of many, it's wines like this that they think of. It's all things champagne to all people – fresh, creamy, balanced. The dosage is noticeable, but not overdone. A very enjoyable drink. (\$70.00) ★★★★★

Billecart-Salmon Extra Brut The nose is very lively, showing apple, floral notes and toast. The palate is decidedly dry but balanced, with excellent length and flavour. (\$80.00) ★★★★★

Ayala Brut Majeur Here's an impressively delicate bouquet with subtle autolysis. The palate is long and creamy, reflecting a dosage at the bottom end of Brut. (\$65.00) ★★★★★

Bollinger Special Cuvée Musky and toasty, showing much more pinot noir than chardonnay. Bollinger NV went through a period of great inconsistency where sherry-like aldehydes were common. This one is very fresh and rich, with an uplifting acid finish. (\$70.00) ★★★★★

Piper Heidsieck Cuvée Brut Looking for a "house" champagne? Here it is. The nose is enhanced by subtle bready autolysis aromas, and the palate is fresh and creamy, nicely softened by the faint dosage sweetness. (\$40.00) ★★★★★
<https://www.danmurphys.com.au>
<https://www.liquorland.com.au>

Pol Roger Pure NV The attractive nose shows elements of both chardonnay and pinot noir, with the latter slightly more evident. There's real power here, and a long dry finish – maybe a little too dry. (\$100.00) ★★★★★

Mumm Cordon Rouge A good clean-cut style with a touch of breadiness. This is a spot-on "commercial" NV with a mid-range dosage balanced by lively acidity. (\$45.00) ★★★★★

Taittinger Brut Réserve Subtle, fresh, enticing, tight, racy and comparatively dry. A good apéritif. (\$55.00) ★★★★★

Besserat de Bellefon Cuvée des Moines A full-on nuts and butter style of champagne. Rich flavour is backed up by acidity, but the palate lacks fineness. (\$90.00) ★★★★★

Alfred Gratien Cuvée Brut Classique It's fresh, but also shows some depth of aged reserves. The palate is full-flavoured, intense and dry, but the acidity is slightly hard. (\$70.00) ★★★★★

Achille Princier Grande Tradition Very fresh and clean, but a little simple. There's only a hint of breadiness. Not bad palate weight, but there's a faintly green acid edge. (\$54.00) ★★★

Moët & Chandon Brut Imperial Fresh simple perfumed green apple aromas. Lightness of flavour tends to accentuate the mid-range dosage sweetness. Technically correct but not inspiring. (\$50.00) ★★★

Lanson Black Label Brut Very understated nose with a nutty hint. Fresh but lean and acidic. (\$50.00) ★★★

Perrier-Jouët Grand Brut Fresh, but comparatively simple and fruit-driven. The dosage sweetness appears to be towards the top end of Brut. (\$60.00) ★★★

Canard Duchene Leonie Brut Quite primary aromas and flavours, with hints of poached quince and musk. Almost sparkling chablis. (\$65.00) ★★★

Nicolas Feuillatte Brut Réserve Particulière A simple, light, apple/citrus style. (\$48.00) ★★★

Jeeper Grande Réserve Fresh but short green apple flavour. Simple. (Not yet on sale) ★★★

Cattier Brut Premier Cru Nutty to the point of aldehyde. There's too much complexity for the fruit. (\$40.00) ★★★

Deutz Brut Classic There's a slight marmalade overtone and a hint of toast. Curious. The finish is hard. Botrytis? (\$80.00) ★★

I decided to lead off a series of champagne bulletins with non-vintage because they're very much wines of the moment. The next batches could already be on the way, and very few houses print the date of disgorgement on the back label. So don't waste time, try some of these now.

Lester Jesberg

★★★★★	Outstanding	97-100 pts	Gold medal
★★★★☆	Highly Recommended	93-96	Gold or high silver
★★★★	Recommended	90-92	Silver
★★★☆☆	Recommended	87-89	Bronze
★★★	Agreeable	85-87	Bronze
★★☆☆	Agreeable	82-84	
★★	Acceptable	80-82	
★☆☆	Acceptable	77-79	
★	Barely Acceptable	74-76	
☆	Unacceptable	71-73	
No stars	Undrinkable	<71	

If you're not a Winewise subscriber, please join us (Only \$35 per year) <http://winewise.net.au/>