



JACQUESSON

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CHAMPAGNE
JACQUESSON

— FAMILLE CHIQUET —

No champagne house today is on a trajectory of ascent as steep as Jacquesson. While many houses are on the prowl for more fruit to increase production, Jacquesson has drastically slashed its yields and its contracts to radically improve quality in spite of lowering quantity. When others set out to make a consistent blend every year, Jacquesson throws uniformity to the wind to draw the best blend out of every vintage. Each time I look, this little house in the village of Dizy appears more like a fanatical grower-producer. Purely on the refinement of its current cuvées, Jacquesson has leapt from ranking among Champagne's top 20 houses to a lofty position among its top 10.

The concept of non-vintage champagne has never sat quite right with me. Blending multiple vintages to deal with the ups and downs of the seasons makes sense. But creating a consistent style that tastes the same every year seems unambitious or at best an elusive ideal.

When a particularly blessed season arrives, why must it always be dumbed down for the sake of uniformity? Or must it?

'We were making a regular non-vintage at Jacquesson until we became progressively frustrated with it,' Jean-Hervé Chiquet told me when we first tasted his oddly named Cuvée No 734 in the tasting room of the family estate in Dizy.

'We face such vintage variation at this extreme, with fantastic vintages followed by disasters, that our ancestors found that the only way to handle the seasons was to blend vintages to produce consistent wine. This is why 90% of Champagne's production does not carry a vintage. In spring 1998 we were working on our non-vintage from 1997 base and we found a blend that was

very nice, but not the same as the previous non-vintage and not able to be reproduced. At the time, we made an inferior wine to match the consistency of the house. We decided then that there should be a better rule. We thought, what happens if we don't try to imitate what we did last year, but start from a blank sheet of paper and make the best wine that we can every year?'

And so Cuvée 728 was born from 2000 vintage base 'A vintage with reserve wine,' as Jean-Hervé calls it. A different blend every year is reflected by a consecutively rolling number (1272 less than the vintage year) — a 'stupid number', according to Jean-Hervé. 'But two things don't change: the fruit sources and the taste of the two guys who do the blend!'

RADICAL CHANGE

Those two guys are brothers Jean-Hervé and Laurent Chiquet, whose family purchased the company in 1978 and transferred its headquarters to their own family's historic estate. 'I spent 10 years campaigning to my

father that we could do something differently,' Jean-Hervé says.

'Then in 1988 he allowed me and my brother to take over and we spent 12 years changing everything about the structures of the company and the vineyards. But in 2000 we realised that the changes were not reflected in the wines, so it was then that we changed the entire range. We took big risks in changing the style to introduce the 700 series. A risk of losing most of our customers and a risk of big investment with no return for some years. We had to be good friends with our bank manager!'

While 2002 marked the turning point of what Jean-Hervé describes as 'deconstructing Jacquesson', a champagne house is like an ocean liner and it takes a generation to turn around. 'Our last Late Disgorged 2002 will be sold between 2019 and 2021, from a regime we started talking about in 1978, so it takes 43 years for the change to fully take effect.' And the Jacquesson revolution is far from over yet.

The house has introduced a series of drastic changes to raise quality in recent vintages. At a time when many houses are seeking to extend their fruit sources, Jacquesson has radically initiated just the opposite. Yields were lowered in 2008 at the same time as fruit purchases were strategically slashed from 40 hectares to just eight, lowering annual production from 350,000 bottles to 250,000–260,000 today, with estate vines now supplying almost 80% of needs. 'The quality of what we grow means we are less satisfied with the fruit we buy, so we dropped those vineyards that were not up to the standard of our rising expectations,' Jean-Hervé declares. Any parcels vinified that don't meet their standards are sold.

Further, the age of release of the 700 series has been progressively stepped up, from three years on lees for Cuvée 733 (2005 base) to four years for Cuvée 736 (2008), though back to 3.5 years for Cuvée 740 (2012). Meanwhile, allocations have been further lowered by holding back an average of 15,000 bottles from each release since Cuvée 733, to release as a Late Disgorged 700 series, with an additional 4–5 years of bottle age.

'We may be the only champagne producer to take the risk of releasing their entry wine at nine years of age!' Jean-Hervé suggests. These are radical measures for any wine region, unheard of for a champagne house, and reflect resoundingly in the calibre of the 700 series today.

FANATICAL GROWER

Jacquesson's cuvées are complex blends that age impressively and reflect the intricate attention to detail

applied at every step of their creation. This begins in the vineyards. According to Jean-Hervé, there are five factors in wine: 'Terroir, viticulture, viticulture, viticulture and winemaking!' He describes Jacquesson as a grower more than a champagne house, and himself and his brother as 'frustrated growers'. It is this philosophy that underpins the recent transformation of the house. I visited Jacquesson's vineyards towards the end of harvest 2014 and was stunned at how immaculately they are kept.

Their goal in the vineyards is to grow less fruit, slightly riper, to draw out the mineral character of the terroir. 'The detail of our terroirs in Champagne is every bit as sharp as that of Burgundy,' Jean-Hervé points out. Jacquesson directly controls 28 hectares of enviably located premier and grand cru vineyards, 17 in Dizy, Aÿ and Hautvillers, and 11 in Avize, with an additional eight hectares sourced from contract growers in the same villages, who Jean-Hervé describes as 'neighbours and friends'. Jacquesson harvests half the fruit it purchases, and now only buys from its neighbours, 'because we want to see every single berry with our own eyes'. The house today is 40% smaller than it was 25 years ago, now producing just 280,000 bottles. 'Of course, we aim to increase the price.' We may see a price rise when Cuvée 740 lands.

The estate has experimented with organics, with 10 hectares now fully organic, and the remainder run under a minimal-sulphur regime. When I questioned why full organic certification was not the agenda, Jean-Hervé's sensible response was, 'We are here to make good wine as our primary priority.' And 2012 was a strong case in point, with his organic fruit lost to mildew. 'I have always been convinced that a 100% organic system is not reasonable in Champagne's climate,' he explains.

Traditional methods are used throughout: little or no soil improvers, no herbicides or pesticides, minimal spray regimes, use of ploughing, cover crops between rows, and pruning to control vigour, increase ripeness, and limit yields to an average of around 60hl/hectare – just two-thirds of Champagne's average. 'The problem with Champagne is that every grower considers the maximum yield permitted by the appellation to be an economic minimum,' he admits. He describes cover cropping as particularly effective in controlling yields, but acknowledges that until recent environmental priorities became prominent, this was practised by significantly fewer than 1% of Champagne growers. Selection is very important to Jacquesson, and all *tailles* is sold, as well as any declassified parcels.

Jacquesson's attention in the vineyard allows its cuvées to capture the expression of the soil, exemplified

in its trilogy of single-vineyard, single-varietal, single-vintage wines produced in minuscule volumes (never more than 10% of production in total), from three special little plots in Aÿ, Dizy and Avize. 'Terroir is the most unfair part of the wine business – you either have the right place or you don't!' Jean-Hervé says. 'It is very important to talk about terroir in champagne.' And talk terroir these cuvées do, articulating chalk mineral textures of disarming clarity. Jacquesson's single-vineyards and late-disgorged 700 series cuvées are tiraged under cork.

HANDS-OFF WINEMAKING

Jacquesson's scrupulous practices in the vineyard are mirrored in its hands-off approach in the winery. All fruit is pressed in its own press houses. 'Pressing is very important in champagne because we have this stupid idea of making white wine from red grapes!' he exclaims. 'We must hand pick and press close to the vineyard or we'll end up with jam.'

Gentle vertical presses are used, and the very first juice is removed 'because it has washed the outside of the grapes'. No chaptalisation has been performed since 2007. 'You only need to chaptalise when there is a problem,' Jean-Hervé points out.

Each parcel is vinified separately in large 45hL oak foudres to allow the wine to breathe, after which it is left on lees and stirred until a relatively late bottling in June or July. Lees stirring produces creaminess and body, and has an antioxidant effect, and so no sulphur dioxide is added between pressing and disgorgement.

'Malolactic fermentation is the eternal debate in Champagne,' Jean-Hervé suggests. 'We favour malolactic fermentation as we don't want to use heavy

sulphur dioxide additions or filtration.' Traditionally, Jacquesson has run malolactic fermentation to completion, but more recently has blocked it in less than 20% of ferments by using cooling. There is also no fining, 'to maintain the aromatic potential of the fruit'.

To build complexity, reserves for the 700 series wines are the previous blends, kept separate in foudres, demi-muids and enamelled tanks, with reserves back to Cuvée 735 (2007 base) currently in stock. No single parcels are kept as reserves, which makes allocation of parcels a simple choice between the 700 series, the three single vineyards or discarding them to sell. 'Our blending is very easy because we sort of blend everything except the single vineyards,' Jean-Hervé explains. A trial blend is created using the single vineyards, and if the blend needs them, no single vineyard cuvées are made.

All Jacquesson cuvées have been extra brut (less than 6g/L dosage) since 2000, although only recently declared on labels. 'We never intended to make extra brut, but we just don't think our wines need more dosage,' says Jean-Hervé.

Dosages have become progressively lower, but this trend has never been a conscious decision. 'Some of our wines have no dosage, not because we wanted to make zero-dosage wine, but because they were better wines this way,' he says.

Back labels are among the most informative of any champagne house, shamelessly declaring disgorgement date, dosage, base vintage, blend and even precise production quantities.

There are no secrets here, just great champagnes, and better than ever. As Jean-Hervé puts it, 'At Jacquesson, we just want to grow great fruit and make great wines.'



JACQUESSON CUVÉE NO 740 EXTRA-BRUT NV \$\$

94 points • 2012 BASE VINTAGE • DISGORGED JULY 2016 • TASTED IN AUSTRALIA
43% chardonnay, 30% meunier and 27% pinot noir from Aÿ, Dizy, Hautvillers, Avize and Oiry;
20% reserves (usually more than 30%); majority of reserves from older 700 series blends for the first time; 1.5g/L dosage; 211,978 bottles

To properly respect the 700 series, treat it like a vintage wine, and don't be alarmed when it's introverted and tightly restrained on release. It will open beautifully a year later, and truly blossom five or 10 years on. The 740 is built around a core of grapefruit, nashi pear and almost ripe fig, with a dry focus that accentuates wonderfully present, salty oyster-shell chalk minerality. Large barrel fermentation brings impressive coherence, creamy seamlessness, fine-tuned texture and the slightest charcuterie nuances. It lingers with great line, persistence and integrity. A very classy 700 series.



JACQUESSON CUVÉE NO 738 EXTRA-BRUT NV \$\$

94 points • 2010 BASE VINTAGE • DISEGORGED NOVEMBER 2014 • TASTED IN CHAMPAGNE

61% chardonnay, 21% meunier, 18% pinot noir; 33% reserves; 2.5g/L dosage; 275,936 bottles

Jean-Hervé Chiquet is the first to admit that Cuvées 738 and 739 proved to be a challenge, based on the difficult vintages of 2010 and 2011. He pulled out every stop for 738 in this challengingly warm and wet season, producing no single-vineyard wines and using a very high proportion of chardonnay to build finesse and elegance. 'The idea of this cuvée is to give the identity of the base vintage, but we had to put a lot of things in here to make it work!' exclaims Jean-Hervé. And work it does, an impressive result for the season, albeit, inevitably, a lesser example of 700 series. I suggested on its release two years ago that it would benefit from a few more years to develop, and that it has. Chardonnay takes its lead with impressive citrus freshness, fleshed out by the stone fruit succulence of meunier and pinot noir. Skilfully managed barrel work spins beautifully woven texture without oxidation or oak character, building a fine, creamy mouthfeel that amplifies salty minerality. A well-crafted and characterful wine of driving structure, charged with excellent acid line, finishing even, dry and long.

JACQUESSON CUVÉE NO 735 DÉGORGEMENT TARDIF EXTRA-BRUT NV \$\$\$\$

91 points • 2007 BASE VINTAGE • DISEGORGED NOVEMBER 2015 • TASTED IN AUSTRALIA

47% chardonnay, 33% pinot, 20% meunier from grand and premier crus in the Grande Vallée de la Marne and Côte des Blancs; 28% reserves; more than 7 years on lees; 3.5g/L dosage; 16,220 bottles

735 has returned for an encore, transforming into a complex style in which secondary development is the theme in toast and roast brazil nut characters, touched with tertiary notes of sweet pipe smoke and black olives. Long lees age has brought wonderfully creamy seamlessness, supporting prominent, fine, frothing, salty chalk minerality. The finish is beginning to show some dryness and a little contraction, signalling the close of life for this bottle.



JACQUESSON DIZY TERRES ROUGES 2012 \$\$\$\$

98 points • DISEGORGED MARCH 2016 • TASTED IN CHAMPAGNE

52% chardonnay, 24% meunier, 24% pinot noir; 22% reserves; 2.5g/L dosage; 16,000 bottles

In a sneak preview of the first release of Dizy Terres Rouges as a white champagne, Jean-Hervé Chiquet disgorged this bottle on the day of my visit in 2016 and wowed me with a remarkable cuvée that transcends the terroir of Dizy. In its youthful guise it led out with layers of wood spice, pineapple core, grapefruit and white nectarine, opening into a breathtaking red cherry purity of exceptional line and length. Profound chalk minerality permeated the palate with remarkable distinction. I have long admired Terres Rouges as a powerfully distinctive rosé, and had always wondered at Jean-Hervé Chiquet's suggestion that this terroir would sit better as a white. Now, finally and emphatically, I understand.



JACQUESSON DIZY TERRES ROUGES ROSÉ EXTRA-BRUT 2009 \$\$\$\$

96 points • DISGORGED JANUARY 2016 • TASTED IN CHAMPAGNE AND AUSTRALIA

Skin-contact rosé of pinot noir; 1.35-hectare single vineyard on the boundary of Dizi and Hautvillers, planted 1993; vinified in oak foudres; aged 5.5 years on lees; zero dosage; 9496 bottles

The aspiration of Terres Rouges is a pronounced expression of pinot noir, yet with finesse. For Jean-Hervé, the 2009 transcends even the great 2008, with greater balance and more volume, while retaining brightness. He's right. It's a uniquely full-bodied and tightly structured rosé of deep-crimson hue – think halfway between champagne rosé and full-blown red Burgundy. It has the structure to match, with a firm, fine tannin backbone, grippy and chewy, yet harmonious and confident, ready for protein-rich pink meats. For all of its structure, it projects a gorgeous complexity of rose petal and musk aromas over a palate of deep and pronounced fresh red cherry, strawberry and raspberry fruit, and even a hint of tomato bush. A contrast between the focused tension of bright acid line and the structural grip of tannins and wonderful chalk minerality is no easy juxtaposition to juggle, yet Jacquesson has pulled it off with exacting precision. It's powerfully seductive and characterful. And it will age long, too.

JACQUESSON DIZY CORNE BAUTRAY EXTRA-BRUT 2007 \$\$\$\$

96 points • DISGORGED JANUARY 2016 • TASTED IN CHAMPAGNE & AUSTRALIA

South-west facing single-vineyard Dizi on the boundary with Aÿ, planted in 1960 on millstone-grit gravel over clayey marl and Campanian chalk; 100% chardonnay; vinified and aged in oak casks on lees; unfiltered; aged 7.5 years in bottle; zero dosage; 5760 bottles

Jean-Hervé has no idea why his father planted chardonnay in Dizi, but a half-century later these old vines have tapped so deep into the terroir that the voice of the soil speaks above the tones of the fruit and the expression of the barrels. The 2007 proves that the inexplicable chalk mineral impression of the preceding vintages was no fluke, speaking in profound, deep and irrefutable notes of salty chalk texture and flavour, from a site with chalk no less than 2.5 metres under the surface, in a village unrecognised for chardonnay of structure. Crunchy apple, nashi pear, bright lemon and grapefruit are backed with the subtle almond meal, brioche, anise, lemon meringue and even coffee nuances of long lees age, finishing structured and scaffolded by salty chalk minerality and acid tension, unified by the calming influence of barrel fermentation. In length, energetic drive, poise and sheer character of personality, this is one of the greats. As ever, all it calls for is time, and it promises to blossom in a decade.



JACQUESSON DÉGORGEMENT TARDIF EXTRA-BRUT MILLÉSIME 2000 \$\$\$\$

94 points • DISGORGED JANUARY 2016 • TASTED IN AUSTRALIA

50% chardonnay, 50% pinot from the Grande Vallée de la Marne, Côte des Blancs and Montagne de Reims; 1.5g/L dosage; 1688 bottles

A glowing, full straw yellow-hue proclaims the radiant, sun-drenched 2000 season. The generosity of the year prevails, now well developed into the buttered toast, roast almonds and spice of maturity, with some of the smoky, olive-like notes of grand old age beginning to materialise. The fleshy mood of the season contrasts a dry, savoury and structured finish that proclaims the prominent salt minerality that Jacquesson so accurately preserves. Though now toward the end of its life, it grasps its integrity and hovers with great length and alluring character.