Daring to Innovate

A small Champagne house breaks the non-vintage mould while an emerging talent from Burgundy makes his mark with a top array of wines without actually owning a vineyard.

CHAMPAGNE JACQUESSON

- Champagne, France

Jacqueessou has been one of the smaller houses adding untypical colour to Australia's Champagne market in recent years. But it's a house with a long history. Founded at the end of the 18th century, it grew to reach significant production levels over the ensuing 100 years and gained a reputation for innovation in production. Tough economic times saw sales decline early in the 20th century and the new owners, the Chiquet family, bought it in the 1970s, moving it to the village of Dizy where it resides today, around the corner from their cousin's (larger) Champagne house, Gaston Chiquet.

It is fair to say that Jacques's current generation, with Jean-Hervé Chiquet at the wheel, has had an eye firmly fixed on quality and distinction since taking over in 1986. The estate farms 30 hectares of its own vineyard and operates another 10 hectares under lease. The family is deeply wedded to the concept of terroir and are certainly utilising every available method to enhance these aspects of their wines, including organic practices.

On the production side there's a traditional face to the Jacques story. It operates three flat presses in almost artisan fashion and the cellar is filled with timber casks – a stark contrast to the stainless-steel matrix of most larger Champagne houses. The house differs from the norm in philosophy too, championing quality ahead of the Champenoise obsession with similarity and consistency.

The most definitive statement of this is the Jacques concept of effectively replacing the all important non-vintage wine with a single numbered cuvée. The rationale is that although the shortcomings of lesser vintages are often addressed via reserve blending, the peaks of quality seen in exceptional years are sacrified too. The net result of Jacques's solution to capture the best qualities of strong vintages is a kind of quasi-vintage wine that is based around the expression of one particular year and is celebrated for the character of the harvest. A risky business, but with the release of Cuvée No. 733 Jacques has delivered admirably on its quality promise over six releases under this regime.

In addition to the risk of innovation and bucking the weighty tradition of non-vintage Champagne production, the naming of these wines posed a vexing question. The first of these new-style wines, Cuvée No. 728, was purily, very fruit expressive on the nose, some citrus, beeswax, a floral note and chalk. The palate boasts a smoky edge with an almost honey fruit texture, savoury creamy pinot meunier notes and a grilled nutty flavour at the finish. Roundness and finesse combine in a fine sense of balance, harmonious, complete and astutely characterized. At the pristine end of their offering is the 2000 Champagne Jacques Avize Grand Cru (AS160795), a blanc de blancs from three vineyard parcels in the village of Avize. The season was characterized by higher than average temperatures and wet, volatile July weather that included the dreaded cloud of hail. Unfiltered, less stirred and fermented in oak, chardonnay's delicate fruit is framed in savoury complexity. Oyster shell and chalky autolysis arrives amid pink musky florals, citrus rind and gentle marzipan.

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