

## CROIX D'IRVAL (France, Champagne, Coulommès la Montagne)

**BACKGROUND:** Jean Servagnat is in his early 30s and left his bank career in 2010 to pursue wine making.

His family has been in Champagne for many generations, living at Irval and owns a 4.5 hectares vineyard at Coulommès la Montagne, between Reims and Epernay. Historical references to the property name are pretty easy to track down. Croix d'Irval brings together ancient roots and history as a large cross stands at the top of a roof at Irval, linked to the crusades during the 14th century. Now, this powerful cross represents the family 'savoir-faire' and values, fashioned by time, by the understanding of the nature around them and by high quality requirements.



The cuverie is in neighboring Vrigny and is state-of-the-art. Jean currently blends 50% of harvest juice (for bottles commercialized in 2016, 2012 vintage) with 50% reserve wine (in 2016, wines from older vintage, mainly 2011 and 2010) from older family plots of 2.5 additional hectares. In 2020, the family's 20-yr rental agreement on these vineyards will expire and Croix D'Irval will possess 7 hectares in total (including 2.5 ha in Sermiers).

**JEAN & THE PINOT MEUNIER:** He is a specialist of the Pinot Meunier grape, one of the few "recoltant manipulant" working with this variety as the main star of the blending. Pinot Meunier is a distinctive varietal of the Petite Montagne de Reims. It brings to this wine a mature nose with a silky side, while Chardonnay provides softness and lightness to the wine, and the Pinot Noir gives body and intensity.

Particularly robust Meunier variety shows better cold-weather resistance than the Pinot Noir and is particularly well suited to the more argillaceous soils of the Marne Valley. It adds roundness to the blend, producing supple, fruity wines that tend to age more quickly than wines made with the other two varieties. By the way Meunier could be roughly translated in "miller" in English, because the berries are so covered by dusty looking coating (pruinosity) to look like flour.

Jean elaborates all his Champagnes allowing spontaneous fermentation triggered by the indigenous yeast

**THE BRUT PREMIER CRU CHAMPAGNE:** The current offering of Croix D'Irval Brut 1er Cru comes from 25-year old vines in Coulommès. The interesting blend is 70% Pinot Meunier (plus equal parts Chardonnay and Pinot Noir), producing a clean, structured but fruity profile with lasting minerality. The color is a beautiful pale hue and the bubbles are elegant and persistent. Overall this Champagne is generous, displaying a grapefruit flavor profile, and it features all you can expect from a great Premier Cru.

Each phase of the elaboration of the Premier Cru Champagne is accurately timed. Vineyards in Coulommès average age is 25 years and rootstocks are mainly 41B. Soil type is clay and chalk with layers of sand. Sustainable wine growing is applied and the harvest is done manually.



Grapes are pressed in a traditional 4000 kg vertical press which allows a better control by splitting the must. All the three wines underwent malolactic fermentation. Ageing on lees before the blending is set up for 4 to 6 months, giving the wine an intense structure. After the blending the wines rest in Jean's cellar and wait at least 3 years on lees before the disgorging. After 4 to 6 months from the *dégorgement* the Champagne is sold to the market. Conservation: up to 3-4 years. Alcohol by volume: 12%. Total Acidity: 6,9g/l TH2. Dosage: homemade liquor, 9g/l of sugar.

The Premier Cru prestigious appellation, reserved to 44 villages of the 312 in Champagne area, reflects the high quality of the soil and terroir of this gorgeous area. This historical denomination still in place is guarantee of quality and of constant taste throughout the years. Given the total hectares in Champagne (33.000), only 5.000 have been recognized as Premier Cru.

Here you'll find a couple of professional reviews of Jean's Brut 1er Cru:

*"Beautiful pale golden color with a high profile effervescence. Plentiful and a very nice quality of the bubbles. Nose progressively intense, aromas are possessed of great candidness and of exemplary quality. Fruity palate, marvellous freshness, nicely mineral. This very much appreciated wine is clean and neat. High quality aromatic persistence. A must have"* - Concours Mondial de Bruxelles, June 2015

*« Apple crumble with hints of wild flowers and mandarin. A creamy palate full of white peach flavour. Interesting and attractive. »*

Decanter, April 2014.

**THE EXTRA BRUT CHAMPAGNE:** More recently Steep Hill started to import the Extra Brut Champagne as well. Once again the breakdown is 70% Pinot Meunier, 15% Chardonnay, 15% Pinot Noir coming from 30 years old vineyard marked by clayey-chalky to sandy clayey-chalky soil. Rootstocks are mainly 41B.

The varieties are harvested at the end of September by hand. Dosage here is made with home-made liquor (just 3g/l of sugar). The current blend focuses on mainly on the 2013 harvest (at least 50%)

Disgorged 12 months before commercialization, this champagne can hold up to 4 years and its more robust compared to the Premier Cru Brut.

With its 12% AbV it presents sharp and toasted, enhanced aromas. Pure expression of the local terroirs, this Extra Brut is of a great delicacy. Its intensity is the result of tough weather conditions in the Champagne region and the current lot remained a year more in Jean's cellars compared to the rest of his cuvees.

This ageing process altogether with the low dosage gives to this wine a genuine sentiment of purity with great fresh smokiness.



**THE PINOT MEUNIER LEAGUE:** This is considered the workhorse grape varietal in Champagne although it accounts for one third of the total planting, fewer than Pinot Noir (38%) but more than Chardonnay. Other approved varietals are the white Arbane, Petit Meslier, Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris - together less than 0.3% of plantings. Yet while the grape hierarchy is unlikely to change any time soon, a handful of small grower-producers in Champagne are demonstrating the very real potential of Pinot Meunier to produce wines that are not merely palatable but superb: distinctive, joyful and intriguing.

Here is a short list of some of the outsider producers working 100% Meunier driven Champagnes or at least with a dominant 70%: Michel Lorient in the Vallée de la Marne uses only Meunier in his non vintage Réserve Brut, and it's a lovely Champagne, lacy and subtle yet lively. Laherte Frères makes a vintage-dated extra brut entirely of Pinot Meunier from old vines, planted from 1947 to 1964. Egly-Ouriet, a cult independent producer, although best known for its blanc de noirs made entirely of Pinot Noir, its most unusual Champagne may be a blanc de noirs of Pinot Meunier, made from several parcels of old vines near Vrigny in the Montagne de Reims. If any Pinot Meunier Champagne has achieved a devoted following, it's La Closerie from Jérôme Prévost, made from his vineyard, Les Béguines, almost 2.5 hectares planted entirely with this varietal.

Jean Servagnat with his effort and enthusiasm is capable to be permanent member of this league as well: for sure this is an estate-to-watch.