

THE HORIZONTAL: 1996 VINTAGE

AGING WITH GRACE

Nearly 20 years on, the 1996 vintage in Champagne is beginning to assume stellar status, showing generous but supremely balanced proportions of ripeness, density and verve. CHARLES CURTIS tastes 34 of the best.

The 1996 vintage is thrilling, producing wines that will age gracefully for 50 years or more. The reason for this quality is simply that there is more of everything: more ripeness, more extract, more concentration and – importantly – more acidity than almost any previous vintage. It ranks alongside 1928 and 1955 as one of the greatest years for Champagne in the 20th century. The added bonus is that, unlike those two vintages, bottles from 1996 are still widely available.

The season didn't carry the hallmarks of a great vintage. It started well, with a fine spring, and although the flowering was slightly affected by millerandage (irregular fruit set leading to both small and large berries in the same bunch), this served to limit yields and improve concentration. However, the hot, damp summer raised fears of rot and mildew, and cool weather in September made growers wonder if their grapes would ripen. Luckily, the warmth returned just before the end of the season, while cool nights allowed the grapes to retain brilliant acidity. The result is powerful, concentrated wines that show great balance and will age beautifully for decades.

THE RANKING



THE TOP TWO

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Krug Clos du Mesnil
Blanc de Blancs

100

A monumental wine: absolutely superb. Just now opening up, with a hint of coconut and tropical fruit along with candied citrus peel, woodsmoke and minerality. The texture is beguiling, with the once-sharp edges now slightly rounded and an expressive, creamy density that lingers exceptionally on the palate. Without question, this is the greatest Champagne of the decade.

Bollinger Vieilles Vignes
Françaises Blanc de Noirs

99

Spectacular is the only word for this Blanc de Noirs produced from old Pinot Noir vines (grown on their own roots) in Aÿ. The aroma is supremely rich and toasty, with an almost red berry fruit character. Creamy and dense, and more about power than finesse, the wine-like character is very pronounced, and the finish astonishingly long. One of the great Champagne experiences out there.