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CHAMPAGNE SOLERAS AND PERPETUAL RESERVES: THE TIMELESS ESSENCES OF PLACE AND STYLE

Anne Krebiehl MW explains that rather than regarding reserve wines merely as a technique to ensure consistency across vintages, several leading Champagne producers are exploring the ability of a *réserve perpétuelle* or a solera to improve the expression of house style or the reflection of terroir

Champagne, perhaps more than most classic wine regions, has made an absolute virtue of necessity. By perfecting every aspect of production, the region has overcome climatic challenges and dramatic vintage variation. Second fermentation and extended lees aging add extra body and creaminess to slender, acidic base wines. Careful blending of grape varieties, origins, and vintages creates cuvées that far exceed the sum of their parts. The keeping and blending of reserve wines is and has been central to this, evening out vintages as variable in quality as in quantity. But reserves can be a stylistic tool, too. While most houses keep their reserves separate according to vintage, grape variety, and site, some producers keep a *réserve perpétuelle*. They have compelling and varied reasons for doing so. They create Champagnes that, for lack of better terms, taste of both time and timelessness.

While there is a lot of talk about so-called soleras, it is Thibaut Le Mailloux, communications director of the CIVC (Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne) who reminds me to be careful about the terminology: “The *réserve perpétuelle* is simply a consequence, an evolution of the concept of reserve wines into a technical approach. When you speak about a ‘solera,’ you give the impression that Champagne has imported a technique from Jerez. While we are very respectful of the identity of different terroirs, and with the protection of the name of Champagne we spend our time claiming that wine regions should not leverage on the image or technique of other wine regions, we as well as Jerez belong to the declaration of place. A lot of Champenois have used the term ‘solera’ to help people understand what they are doing—but technically it is not always a solera. On the other hand, *réserve perpétuelle* is a way to put the reserve wine principle into practice. I think it’s very interesting because it highlights one of the key characters of Champagne in terms of winemaking approach that relates to terroir and to climate.” Indeed, there is a clear distinction between these techniques of keeping and blending reserve wines. The producers featured here are careful not to mislabel what they are doing and are also absolutely clear about their technique. What differs is their motives.

Selosse: reflecting history, revealing personality

“For me, the solera exists to create a climatic average and therefore one constant of a terroir; what is constant is the origin,” says Anselme Selosse of Champagne Jacques Selosse in Avize. “The *réserve perpétuelle*, on the other hand,” he explains, “is a reserve that families used to keep in order to reduce the variations between the years.” Depending on how large or small the harvest was, he says, the perpetual reserve was fluid; sometimes there was more, sometimes less. “The *réserve perpétuelle* is not systematic; it is variable and a function of the volume of the new vintage, whereas the solera always has the same quantity.” He keeps both a solera and a *réserve perpétuelle* and clearly distinguishes between the two. His adoption of these practices is linked to different ideas, memories, and experiences.

He started his solera many years before he started the perpetual reserve and delves far into the past to explain: “I had a terrible adolescence. I did not like parental authority,” he says, which resulted in him being sent to boarding school when he was 12 years old. Luckily he liked the hands-on science of agriculture. “I discovered that viticulture was full of things to explore. However, the wine school in Champagne was just opposite my parents’ house, so I was sent to the school in Beaune, and I would come home only once every six weeks.” Beaune is where he studied viticulture from 1969 to 1973. It was during these student days in Burgundy that sporting excursions took him to the countryside, where he got to taste very simple local wines, often made with *réserve perpétuelle*. “I first got to know this in the Bresse,” he says, referring to a rural area straddling the French regions of Rhône-Alpes, Bourgogne, and Franche-Comté, where simple reds were made from Pinot Noir and Gamay, not for the market but for home consumption. “Just because this was simple does not mean it was not good,” he emphasizes. “The *réserve perpétuelle* was the family wine; it was not about vintages at all. Do you know a little bit about the history of cuisine?” he asks, then likens the perpetual reserve to the stockpots of the past that were kept on the stove continuously, serving as the base for soups and sauces and constantly having quantities taken out while being replenished

with more water and ingredients. But he notes that this was not necessarily a Champenois tradition. “In Champagne there was a tradition of *marques* that were rich in the character of those who made them—hence, the way of working was based on making blends. In Champagne you had the habit of conserving reserves year by year,” in order to facilitate blending.

But Selosse also traveled farther afield during his studies. “In 1972,” he says, “I went to Spain to visit Penedès, Rioja, and Andalusia, and I saw the gran reservas there. I saw cathedrals of barrels, which had almost completely disappeared from Champagne and were in the process of disappearing from Burgundy. In Andalusia, I saw the practice of the solera and its usage. I saw it, but I still had no idea.” Later on, in the cellar, Selosse shows me an empty bottle of *Viña Tondonia* and tells me how much influence this had on him. It becomes clear that it took years for Anselme to formulate his way of working.

His parents were wine growers in Champagne. In 1974, once he had returned home after his studies, they handed him the keys to the cellar. They were keen to retire and told young Anselme to get to work, as an employee of sorts. “I was alone with 4ha [10 acres] of vines and 7,000 bottles of Champagne to be sold to *négociants*. I was unable to create anything; everything was set up; and until 1979 nothing belonged to me. I just continued what they had started. But in 1975 I bought 1ha [2.47 acres] of vines. This is where I started to work the way I wanted, the way I intended: without herbicides, without nitrogen.” This 1ha was in Avize; his parents’ 4ha were in Cramant and Avize. When I ask what made him do that, the answer comes promptly: “Because of my time in Burgundy. I remembered what the old vigneron said. With all of the herbicides, after the harvest the vine colors were just not right; there was something dysfunctional in the ecosystem.” Selosse recalls that at the time in Champagne it was all about being that little bit cheaper than your neighbor. “But I thought that we had to offer something different,” he says. It was also the advent of organic viticulture in the region. While some of the earlier practitioners were, says Selosse, rather dogmatic, he wanted to see for himself what the differences were. “I never liked to follow the crowd. But it was not a revolution, it was always an evolution—it always happened gently.”

Indeed, the changes he made were implemented slowly, and his ideas were developed quietly. He did not start keeping wines back for a solera until 1986. He experimented, but another thought also occurred to him: The most expensive wines in Champagne at that time were vintages. In Burgundy, however, the most expensive wines were those from specific parcels. These wines were not about the year but about the place. “Since both time and place are equally important for the character of a wine, I wanted to give more of this place to the wine.” But that was difficult. “The only way to put more of the ‘where’ into the wine was to have less of the ‘when,’ and in order to do that I remembered the Bresse, I remembered Andalusia, I remembered the gran reservas of the Heredia family,” he says.

“What I want to show is the character,” Selosse says. “Character has two origins, and that goes for me, for vines, for other things: our DNA and our story. These two together form character. For the vines, the ‘where’ is the DNA, the mineral salts of the earth where the vines grow; the story is how the grapes ripen—that is the ‘when.’ The solera focuses only on the ‘where’ and has the average of the ‘when.’” This is why he started to

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keep back the reserve wines that would eventually form a solera. “I did not have the money to buy a small stainless-steel tank; I only had big tanks.” So, the reserves from 1986, ’87, ’88, and ’89 were kept separately in 600-liter *demi-muids* until, together with the 1990 base, he had enough to put these five vintage reserves together to start his first solera. From 1991 onward, he has always taken 22 percent of the volume from the solera and replenished it with the same amount of new base wine from the most recent harvest. The first bottling containing solera reserve was made in 1991. Did this have the result he envisaged? Selosse hesitates: “I don’t know. In 1996 I showed one of the bottles of this first wine to an enologist.” His reaction to the results was one of shock. Selosse was advised to disgorge all of these “oxidized” wines, adding sulfur dioxide and ascorbic acid. “I did as I was told: disgorged 500 bottles and added sulfur. But then I had zombies.” He means the wines were dead, inexpressive. But he still had 1,300 bottles that he had not touched, and from then on he went his own way. Only a few people were interested in what he was doing, but the famous Parisian merchant Lucien Legrand bought some of those 1,300 bottles. “This gave me confidence,” Selosse remembers.

From starting work in 1974, until forging his own way in 1996, he had time to work out exactly what was important to him. To Selosse, time and maturation are crucial; they are what really brings out the character of a place. He emphasizes the Maillard reactions that slowly take place during aging, not only during autolysis in bottle, but also in barrel. “Oxidation sounds pejorative, but oxidation also means arriving at the optimum character. Long fermentation, maturation, and aging allow the wine to become the wine of the place rather than the wine of the producer,” he says, going on to outline his theory: “The mineral salts are the DNA of the place, and they enter the sap, the blood of the vine. When I burn anything vegetal, what is left are ashes, and these ashes are exactly the mineral salts that came from the soil. Time consumes whatever is organic. When I let wine age, after a while I can taste these ashes. All of this relates to the solera.” He refers back to his travels and how the *flor* yeast in a solera consumes glycerol and other organic substances. “So, when I taste Sherry I taste saltiness,” he says. “The sap of the plant provides all of the information, all of the associations.” This sap to him is the essential information, the code. “Each year, in the same place, you have the same quality of the mineral salts. My definition of terroir is a biotope, the sum of physical characters like longitude, latitude, altitude, stone,

Previous spread: Anselme Selosse: “For me, the solera exists to create a climatic average and one constant of a terroir.” Opposite: His perpetual reserve *foudres*.



Photography by Leif Carlsson

slope, clay or not clay, aspect—that is one part. The other part is its associated ecosystem, because you never have the same vegetation on the south side or the north side. It’s different. If I just put a rock into water, even after a year it will not have dissolved. What you need is microorganisms, mycorrhizae, and vegetation. There are root secretions that contain organic acids, and these help dissolve minerals. The acids, however, are specific to certain plants. If I plant a vine and destroy all vegetation, I impoverish everything. For me, it is very important to keep these indigenous plants with my vines.” Armed with Gerard Ducer’s magnum opus *L’Encyclopédie des Plantes Bio-Indicatrices*, Selosse sets out to see what the vegetation in his vineyards tells him. He loves to see chickweed (*Stellaria media*), an indicator for balanced soils and active mineralization, as well as fumitory (*Fumaria officinalis*), also indicative of healthy, balanced soils. Selosse, who learned a lot from biodynamic farming consultants Lydia and Claude Bourguignon, does not claim to farm organically or biodynamically, labels that do not fit his methods.

It is now 26 years since Selosse combined five vintages for the first time to create the solera whose first building block dates back to the 1986 vintage, based on his Chardonnay vines in Avize, some of which were planted in 1922, 1929, or 1952. Is it difficult to keep it alive? “No,” he says. He does not add sulfur dioxide to the solera. “I have experience of adding sulfur,” he says, referring back to the “zombie” wines. He instead relies on the protective properties of lees. Some of the vintage wines he adds to the solera each year do, however, have added sulfur

dioxide. Ideally, he merely adds sulfur dioxide to the must at harvest, when he also uses dry ice and antioxidative tannins derived from tara, green tea, and the skin of white grapes. In some years—including 2014, when the fruit fly *Drosophila suzukii* was a problem—there are additions of sulfur dioxide to the base wine. But Selosse’s entire way of working confounds everything you may read in a text book; some of the barrels in which the base wines are fermented and matured have a film of *flor* and are not filled to the brim. “*Flor*, for me, is no accident; it is a protection,” Selosse says. The wines taste pristine; some even have a touch of reduction. The barrels are made from oak and acacia. Some have staves from acacia and headboards of oak; others, vice versa.

In another part of the cellar, there are three 5,000-liter stainless-steel tanks, all of which constitute the solera, containing additions from 1986 to 2015. The wines from the 2016 harvest are still in barrel. The wines from one tank taste completely rounded, like a full-bodied Chardonnay, fresh and complex. The other tank has a more slender, taut, and austere feel. Selosse likens the difference between the tanks to the variation between phenotypes of the same genotype. This is what will be bottled and fermented as his famous cuvée Substance. Later we taste the finished Substance, based on the solera from 1986 until 2008, for release in September 2017. It is indeed salty, individual, fresh but full-bodied, and so good that it is impossible to spit. Its autolytic character is far weaker than that of the simpler cuvée Brut Initial, based on just three (non-solera) vintages, which we taste later. Substance is, in a way, the timeless essence of Avize Chardonnay.

In 1994 Selosse also bought a Pinot Noir vineyard in Aÿ. “I knew immediately that I wanted to show a climatic average,” he says. “But the plot is small, and I could not go down the route of my old system, so I developed the system in *foudres*. It is just the same as in Bresse: I take the new harvest’s base wine after it has matured, I blend it with the *réserve perpétuelle*, and then I replenish my *foudre*. The volume of the *réserve perpétuelle* is constant; what varies is the amount I harvest and bottle.” Initially this was sold under the name of Contraste, but today it is part of his Lieux Dits series and sold under its plot name, La Côte Faron from Aÿ. The *réserve perpétuelle* is kept in a 1,800-liter *foudre*, and its proportion of new wine changes every year; it is fluid and flexible, whereas the solera is exact and equally proportioned. Selosse thinks he is the first to have started a solera in Champagne, and when producers use this term they refer to a perpetual, blended reserve with exact shares taken and replenished every year.

Devaux: increasing the aromatic range

Another keeper of true soleras is Michel Parisot, *chef de cave* at Champagne Devaux in Neuville-sur-Seine, farther south in the beautiful Aube district. Parisot, who joined Devaux in 1991, is an olfactory obsessive—so much so that he took a course in a perfume school to encounter professionals from different industry backgrounds and see how they work with smell. Even mountain trekking has a partially olfactory objective. The creation of the solera in 1995 was driven by the desire to create more complex aromas. “I work like a perfumer,” Parisot says. “A perfumer has many scents; the winemaker has Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. So, in order to increase the aromatic range, I decided to have different vinification and



aging techniques. The solera is just one of these possibilities, because you have the aromas of very old wines and the aromas of the new wines, so a balance between age and youth.”

Strangely enough, this Aube winemaker started the solera with a Chardonnay from Chouilly in the Côte des Blancs. “In 1997, part of the 1995 reserve was used and topped up with the 1996 reserve. Since then, one third has always been removed and replenished with the same cru. I knew that every year I would have Chouilly; it is a part of the Côte des Blancs that is very elegant—it’s like lace. For me, this finesse and elegance were important.” In order to preserve this, Parisot has always kept the Chouilly solera in stainless steel, on its fine lees. The brilliance of the 2002 vintage, however, sparked another solera that is a blend of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, kept in a 14,000-liter *foudre*. “Here, we had the experience of Chouilly, and every year we saw it getting more and more interesting, so we wondered whether we should have another solera from another cru—but which one? We always had reserves in *foudre*, and 2002 was a marvelous vintage, so we thought it would be beautiful to start with such a great vintage.” Both the Chouilly solera and the Pinot/Chardonnay solera make up some of the NV Cuvée D. But Parisot also has other reserves separated traditionally by year and site. All of these serve to increase the blending elements and, therefore, the complexity of the wine.

When we taste the still soleras, Parisot likens the Chouilly solera 1995–2015 to a white Burgundy: “Even a little bit of this makes a big difference to the blend. You always have the citrus flavors of Chardonnay, but you also have dried fruit and dried

flowers, but you always keep the freshness.” In contrast, the Pinot/Chardonnay solera from *foudre* is wonderfully rounded but restrained. To see the effect of the reserves, we taste the finished Cuvée D, which stays on its lees for at least five years—as a brut (7g/l *dosage*) and an extra-brut known as Ultra D (2–3g/l *dosage*). The base wine is the same, in this case primarily 2009 with about 5 percent each of the Chouilly solera and the blended solera, as well as 30 percent of other reserve wines. The Cuvée D is appetizing and has tender notes of apple, but it is in the bright, expressive Ultra D that the complexity of the wine is far more apparent. The apple notes here are of Red Delicious, showing some Aube generosity but augmented with pure citrus. Altogether there is 40 percent reserve wine, and the *encépagement* turns out to be 45/55 Chardonnay/Pinot Noir. The mousse here is not quite as fine as it could be, but the flavors are pure, lasting, and complex.

Bruno Paillard: stylistic continuity born of necessity

Bruno Paillard in Reims, of the eponymous house, was an early adopter of the *réserve perpétuelle*. “Ah, perhaps I was the inventor of that,” he chuckles and explains. “In 1984, we had an absolutely disastrous vintage. As I had started my maison in 1981, I was not very rich in reserve wines. At that time I kept my reserve wines just like my colleagues did, variety by variety, cru by cru.” When it came to making the blends for bottling in the spring of 1985, “it was just impossible to do anything, and we sold all of our 1984s. We were left only with what we had as reserves. So, we started to acquire reserve wines on the

Alice Paillard, who has now worked for ten years with her father on the *assemblage*, says the perpetual reserve “is one element that gives a lot of continuity of style. It’s the thing that really helps us build consistency. It is a treasure, because it helps us build the balance we need.” It is a delicious notion that a current, highly affordable multivintage Première Cuvée should still have a tiny portion of 1985 in it

market, making sure they were not from 1984. We ended up with much less but much better wine—an excellent wine, in fact. This was the period when we built our reputation. And this is the reason for which we decided to keep our reserve wines in a perpetual reserve.” Since Paillard makes three multivintage cuvées—Première Cuvée, a Rosé, and a Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs—he has three different perpetual reserves with exactly the same varietal composition as the finished cuvée. “The proportions of the grape varieties never vary in the multivintage cuvées,” he explains. “What changes is the origin of the varieties. The vinification does not change; most of our wines do the malolactic; the proportion of barrel fermentation does not vary very much, being always between 20 and 22 percent. The only thing that varies enormously is the proportion of reserve. We use a minimum of 25 percent of the reserve and a maximum of 52. The last time we used 52 percent was in 2004, when we worked with the 2003 vintage, which was beautiful but unbalanced. Roughly, over the past five years the average of reserve wine was between 38 and 40 percent.”

Paillard’s approach is interesting. Each year he composes his cuvée in far greater quantity than is needed for bottling. Whatever is not bottled is returned to the *réserve perpétuelle*. The three *réserve perpétuelles* are thus refreshed every year with the new *assemblage*, which already contains a significant proportion—of exactly the same grape composition—of the reserve itself. The use of reserve is less in the Rosé, Paillard explains: “We want to express the fresh berry aromas, not just floral notes; we want redcurrant, so we insist on fresher wines here.” The perpetual reserves are kept at a constant temperature of 51°F (10.5°C), mostly in stainless-steel tanks but a small part in barrels. Keeping the wines for this length of time is not difficult; the challenge, Paillard says, is more financial and logistical, due to the space required. The perpetual reserve for the Blanc de Blancs was started later, around the turn of the millennium, but those for the Première Cuvée and the Rosé go right back to 1985. Alice Paillard, who has now worked for ten years with her father on the *assemblage*, says the perpetual reserve “is one element that gives a lot of continuity of style. It’s the thing that really helps us build consistency. It really is a treasure, because it helps us build the balance we need.” Speaking more generally about reserves, Bruno Paillard says, “We are very conscious that mother nature is not always

Opposite: Michel Parisot at Devaux: “To increase the aromatic range, I decided to have different vinification and aging techniques. The solera is just one of these possibilities.”

generous; mother nature needs to be respected, and so we respect the soil, we are interested in the future.” This respect, along with the high proportion of reserves in the blend, explains the unusual depth of his multivintage cuvées. It is especially at the table that their profound nature comes into play. It is a delicious notion that a current, highly affordable multivintage Première Cuvée should still have a tiny portion of 1985 in it.

Drappier: nature and nurture

Likewise, for Michel Drappier of Champagne Drappier in Urville, again south in the Aube, a perpetual reserve is a way of adding depth to a Non-Vintage wine. He started his when two factors coincided: the purchase of “beautiful, new 5,000-liter *foudres* with very tight oak from the Forêt de Tronçais” and a beautiful vintage. Drappier explains, “The idea was not to make oaky wines but to be more natural and get away from stainless steel a little. We filled them with beautiful Pinot Noir from 2002, and when bottling the 2002 Grande Sendrée [Drappier’s top cuvée from a single vineyard in Urville] in the spring of 2003, I thought, ‘Why don’t we keep a little of this beautiful wine on the side and see what happens?’ That has become a sort of *réserve perpétuelle*. What we add is always the best Pinot Noir from Urville with the ability to age. This does not happen every year. We remove what we need, which is 10–20 percent, as a mature, slightly oaked reserve. We then top it up with the most beautiful wine from the most recent vintage. By now we’ve been using it for many years in our blends to add a little bit of what we think helps produce good NV wines. Any Non-Vintage Drappier cuvée may contain some of it. Because this *réserve perpétuelle* has been enriched by so many different vintages, we have something very nice.” It is kept in five of these large barrels: “The five *foudres* contain the same quality, quantity, and vintages. The young wine gets its strength from the old,” Drappier says. “For me it was just a tool, adding something to my blends, something mature.” He also keeps other reserves separated by year, by variety, by cru. “With these, we never go back further than three years.”

AR Lenoble: flexibility and stylistic stability

For Antoine Malassagne, co-owner and winemaker at Champagne AR Lenoble in Damery, which he runs with his sister Anne, the perpetual reserves are a stylistic constant. The trained chemical engineer returned to his family business in 1996 and has continually worked to improve every aspect of the house. Why did he start a perpetual reserve in 2001?

Malassagne’s answer is prompt: “More stylistic stability.” There are two perpetual reserves: One is the Chardonnay-based perpetual reserve for the Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs NV from Chouilly; the other, based on Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Pinot Meunier, goes into the Cuvée Intense Brut, Cuvée Dosage Zéro Brut Nature, and Cuvée Riche Demi-Sec. Malassagne, however, adds a twist: “We keep the perpetual reserves in 5,000-liter barrels and in stainless-steel tanks, but we also have some perpetual reserves in magnums. This gives you different characters,” he says, explaining that while he is after a constant house style, his approach is flexible: “It’s not enough to have reserve wine; it also depends on how you age it. Each year, the harvest is different. Each year, I vinify in a different way. I have to adapt my vinification, and sometimes the aging of my reserve wine. The quantity of reserve wine I have also depends



on the last harvest. So, I could tell you, okay, we do the same thing every year, but that makes no sense to me. We do or we don't do malo; I do sometimes, partially or fully—it all depends on the wine. It's like a journey: I know where I want to go, but the ways of getting there are different." It is this flexible but determined approach that has led to the idea of aging some of the perpetual reserve in magnums. "You have to find the right balance between oxidation and reduction. I want something vinous, complex, but not too rich. I want to find a balance between vinosity, femininity, and elegance. Just purity and elegance is not enough: I also want to have some richness on the nose and in the mouth—I just want it all," he laughs. Just enough sugar and yeast is added to the magnums to get 1.5 bars of pressure, "just to protect the wine with carbon dioxide," Malassagne says. "It's not a real second fermentation; we do this to keep the freshness. The thing with the *réserve perpétuelle* is that there is a danger of too much oxidation. I like oxidation, and our style is more marked by that roundness, but not too much. We started the magnums in 2010. Each year we increase the quantity a little. We will release the first cuvée with this perpetual reserve aged in magnums next year."

The house also keeps other reserves, separated by year, in small 225-liter barrels, but only in exceptional years. "We do this when we have very interesting years, and these are kept for the next one or two years." All the other reserves go into the perpetual blends kept in barrel, steel, or magnum. The blended reserves make up a substantial part of the Non-Vintage wines: "This year, for the Cuvée Intense we had about 45 percent of

It is this flexible approach that has led Antoine Malassagne to the idea of aging some of the perpetual reserve in magnums: "I want something vinous, complex, but not too rich. I want to find a balance between vinosity, femininity, and elegance. Just purity and elegance is not enough: I also want to have some richness—I just want it all," he laughs

the *réserve perpétuelle* in the blend; for the NV Chardonnay it was about 50 percent," he explains and says that he likes to keep about 50 percent of the perpetual reserve back. Adopting this practice has also changed his approach to making Vintage wines, of which Malassagne notes that he releases fewer and fewer. When he does make one, it is very special indeed. "But this way I also improve my Non-Vintage Champagne. It's a virtuous cycle. When I decide to produce a Vintage, I never look at existing stock or demand."

Bérèche: history, security, and the image of a terroir
To Raphaël Bérèche, who, together with his brother Vincent runs the small house of the same name in Ludes, perpetual reserves merely represent good housekeeping. Yet his family was the first to release a wine solely based on such a *réserve*



perpétuelle. "If you are normal and you manage your cellar like a father, you don't take all of the reserve wine to put into your blend. You keep a part to have information on your style, on your aging, for the new wine. It's just logical," he says but also notes that the reserve is a kind of essence. For Bérèche, the new wine is "informed" and "educated" by the old wines in the reserve. "It's like aging on lees—the lees give you the feeling from the vineyard, because the lees are the last solid part from the vineyard."

It was his grandfather who started the perpetual reserve, but in the 1980s his father Jean-Pierre decided to bottle some of it separately. Jean-Pierre says, "It was an idea. I had these *demi-muids* with the *réserve perpétuelle*, and I had more than normal. I decided to make this extra cuvée to extend the range." At the time, Raphaël explains, "we just had the Brut Réserve, the Millésime, the Blanc de Blancs, and a Demi-Sec, but we wanted to have something extra at the top of the range. My mother thought of the name, and it's been called Reflet d'Antan ever since." Its first release was in the early 1990s. "That was very original. At the time it was unique in Champagne. In the beginning it was just for friends and long-standing clients, because in early '90s, that was still unusual. People liked light Champagne with a sweet finish; they did not like the aromas of almonds, old stone, humid chalk, biscuits, and torrefaction—that was not fashionable at this period. But over the past ten

Above and opposite: Anne and Antoine Malassagne, for whom the perpetual reserves improve directly or indirectly all of AR Lenoble's Champagnes: "It's a virtuous circle."

"My blend is a picture of this terroir," says Raphaël Bérèche, for whom the new wine is "informed" and "educated" by the old wines in the reserve. "It's like aging on lees—the lees give you the feeling from the vineyard, because the lees are the last solid part from the vineyard." Asked what his perpetual reserve means to him, his answer is telling: "It is my heart and soul, it is very important, it is my history, my security"

years it has grown, grown, grown, and people like this kind of Champagne on the table with food." He says it's lovely with "poulet de Bresse, morilles, truffles, old Comté, or simply after a big meal" on its own.

The *réserve perpétuelle* consists of equal parts Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier, and Chardonnay. "Every year we have the same roha [25 acres], so my blend is a picture of this terroir," he says. It is kept in 600-liter barrels. "Every year we take two thirds of each barrel; we choose the best for one cuvée, Reflet d'Antan, then the rest is for the Non-Vintage." It makes up 35 percent of Bérèche's NV Brut Réserve, and the reserves are then topped up again with the new NV blend already containing some of the reserve. The wines never undergo malolactic.

There is great focus and depth to the Brut Réserve, which has tiny, creamy bubbles and stays straight as an arrow on the palate, expanding into depth rather than breadth. The current release of Reflet d'Antan was bottled in 2012, disgorged April 2016, and dosed with 6g/l. It has notions of preserved, salted lemon and roasted cashew nuts. The mousse is ultra-fine. There is a savory depth with a very persistent umami finish with notions of dashi and again echoes of that roasted cashew. Just like the Brut Réserve, it is straight as an arrow, yet with a lovely, salty, moreish, appetizing depth that makes you want to sip again. "This is for the table," says Bérèche, "for mature cheese or for the end of the meal." In Bérèche's own words, it is reminiscent of wet chalk and roasted almonds. When asked what his perpetual reserve means to him, Raphaël Bérèche's answer is telling: "It is my heart and soul, it is very important, it is my history, my security."

All of these winemakers speak about their motives and their techniques—and it is surprising how much creative latitude there is in just one of the myriad, strictly governed aspects that go into making Champagne. What the producers deliver with the help of these astonishing, complex blends celebrates the broad stylistic spectrum now available in Champagne. It highlights the evolution of the entire category and cements its place at the table. Whatever cru or variety these blends contain, they all have one eternal, irreplaceable, and absolute thing in common: time. The more philosophically inclined among us might concede that wine has a memory, and indeed some of the producers believe that the old wine "informs" and "educates" the young wine. The blends themselves are something essential, something true that totally transcends what is in the bottle and touches the soul. ■