

# THE CHAMPAGNES OF JACQUES SELOSSE

*“Drop all preconceived notions about what Champagne is and can be in order to fully experience the wines of Anselme and Corinne Selosse, as these are Champagnes like no other.”*

Antonio Galloni (The Wine Advocate)

*“His Champagnes are like the man himself. They have assertive character, and they don't try to please everybody. You either love them or you do not. I do.”*

Eric Asimov (New York Times)

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Most French wine regions have their cult personalities. In the Rhône Valley there is Marcel Guigal and Jacques Reynaud; in the Languedoc Aimé Guibert and Laurent Vaillé; in Burgundy Henri Mayer, Jean-François Coche and Lalou-Bize Leroy. In Champagne however, most of the legendary characters are historical and linked to today's mega houses and luxury brands - Dom Perignon, Lilly Bollinger and the widow Barbe-Nicole Clicquot. Things are changing however. A new cast has emerged over the last couple of decades, and the lead role is played by Anselme Selosse - already a legend in his own lifetime.

Anselme decided early that he was going to do things differently. He trained in Burgundy during the 1970s, when the estate bottling revolution swung into action and the act of labelling one's own production - rather than selling it to the previously dominant negociant houses - became the rule rather than the exception. This sounded the death knell for many merchant houses and those that survived (the likes of Jadot, Drouhin, Bouchard etc) had to adapt to the new reality by becoming significant land holders in their own right. This burgeoning group of small grower/bottlers were content to make tiny quantities of terroir specific wines that celebrated the vineyard plots that they came from rather than being blended into obscurity. While the merchants had been sure to do this with the famous 1er and Grand Crus, the rise of the grower meant that *all* the nuances of Burgundy's terroir could finally be celebrated.

In 1974, Anselme took the ideas he had developed in Burgundy back home and by 1980 he had succeeded his father at the family domaine. He stamped his forceful personality on proceedings by immediately moving to organic farming and shifting the emphasis to one of conscientious and committed viticulture. In a region obsessed with yields (the higher the better), Anselme slashed the crop that he expected to take from his vines and put all of his energy into creating a harmonious environment for his plants to grow in. He is, first and foremost, a farmer, and one that takes enormous care of his land. While much of his approach may seem biodynamic, he doesn't go in for most of Steiner's methods, but does what he can to promote harmony and balance in his eco-system and only intervenes when absolutely necessary.

Organic viticulture and low yields weren't the only revolutionary seeds sown by Selosse in those early days - he had fantastic vineyard sites in a range of Grand Cru villages and these were to be celebrated in the range of wines he would develop over the coming years.

Before long, people were talking about Selosse and his idiosyncratic cuvées, more akin to white Burgundy with bubbles than anything that had gone before them in Champagne. During the 1990s his reputation began to build and by the time he elected to withdraw his wines from the American market in 2002 (the rumour goes that it was in response to American attitudes to the French following the invasion of Iraq), he already had a cult following. In the last decade this has bloomed into him being recognised as the founding father and leading light of the grower movement, a category of Champagne that becomes more and more important every year. The likes of Egly-Ouriet (a close friend of Anselme), Jerome Prevost, Larmandier-Bernier, Pierre Peters and many more, are permanent fixtures on the world's best wine lists. For the record, Selosse was back in the USA from 2007 and it is across the Atlantic where some of his most enthusiastic fans are to be found - the Wine Advocate have bestowed some big scores and glowing endorsements of the wines that have been partly responsible for the escalation in the prices of Selosse's wines. Today they are some of the region's most expensive bottles and certainly some of the most difficult to find.

Early on, Anselme wanted to use his wines as a vehicle to communicate the terroir that they came from. In order to do this, he made significant efforts to improve his viticulture, reducing his yields and thus enhancing the concentration of his fruit. In the winery, he instituted wild fermentations and gradually moved towards a policy of minimum sulphur additions and prolonged ageing on the lees. Fermentation takes place in a variety of different barrel sizes and new oak typically represents 15-20% of the barrels in use. Dosage - considered 'make-up' by Anselme - is almost always very low, further enhancing the expression of each vineyard site in the finished wine.

The range of wines starts with **Initial**, **Exquise** and **Version Originale**. All are blends from three consecutive vintages and are assembled from vines in three of the four villages on the slopes of the Côte des Blancs - Cramant, Avize and Oger. Initial (2700 cases) and Exquise (100 cases) are blended from parcels lower down the slope, while V.O (300 cases) comes from parcels higher up. The first two are aged for around 36 months on the lees before bottling - Initial with a low dosage (<5 g/l) and Exquise with around 24 g/l, the only wine that Anselme doses like this. The result is a couple of expansive wines, but Exquise is the more *gourmand* of the two. V.O is aged longer on the lees (42 months) and bottled with little or zero dosage. The fact that it is from higher slopes and is given a lower dose often makes V.O one of the more mineral and racy of Selosse's wines, although it still has the tell-tale richness on the palate.

In 1986, Anselme began the creation of a Solera system for a cuvée called Origine, but it soon became known as **Substance**. The idea behind this wine is to demonstrate the character of Avize (all of the fruit from two parcels in the village) while eliminating the role of vintage variance by blending across a large selection of vintage wines. The two parcels that combine to make the 275 cases of Substance are south facing and east facing and the wine is aged for 5-6 years before disgorgement. Dosage is minimal, but usually varies from 0-5 g/l.

The final blended cuvée that Selosse makes is his **Rosé**, a wine that is predominantly made from Chardonnay (90%) but has some still Pinot Noir from Francis Egly in Ambonnay blended in. The Chardonnay is a blend of two vintages and all comes from vines in Avize and the wine is aged for two years on the lees, before 500 cases are bottled with 4-6 g/l dosage.

From 2010, Selosse was ready to realise a project that he had been planning for a long time - single vineyard bottlings from the solera, of his favourite terroirs. Each bottling will comprise different amounts of wines from different vintages and is very much dependent on how Anselme feels the blend should be at the time, rather than a set process that is repeated each year. There are six different wines, from some of Champagne's best vineyards: **Les Carelles** (in Mesnil-sur-Oger), **Chemin de Chalons** (in Cramant), **Côte de Faron** (in Aÿ), **Bout du Clos** (in Ambonnay), **Le Chantereines** (in Avize) and **Sous le Mont** (in Mareuil sur Aÿ). Côte Faron had previously been bottled as a cuvée called Contraste and is a Blanc des Noirs made from 100% Pinot Noir, as is the Bout du Clos and the Sous le Mont. The other three are 100% Chardonnay Blanc des Blancs. Each of the single vineyard wines is aged for 5-6 years before disgorgement and bottled with a dosage of under 4 g/l, with around 140 cases of each wine produced.