

## Blanc de Noirs: Champagne's Black Beauty



© Bollinger | *The new PN VZ15 from Bollinger is made entirely from Pinot Noir.*

### As Bollinger launches a straight Pinot Noir Champagne, Margaret Rand asks why they are rarely labeled Blanc de Noirs.

By Margaret Rand | Posted Wednesday, 19-Aug-2020

If you make a Blanc de Blancs Champagne you almost certainly put the phrase on the label.

[Salon](#), for example, says Blanc de Blancs proudly on its front label. But if you make a Blanc de Noirs – a white Champagne from black grapes only – you probably don't put it on the label. Bollinger's new release, [PNVZ15](#), made from Pinot Noir only, doesn't say Blanc de Noirs anywhere on its extremely chic black bottle. Why is this?

Marketing, quite simply. Blanc de Blancs is glamorous. Why, it's hard to say, but it is. I remember a sommelier at a top London restaurant telling me of her experience serving [Taittinger Comtes de Champagne](#) to a customer who was clearly going to be trouble. "Madame, here is your Blanc de Blancs, pure Chardonnay," said the sommelier, presenting the bottle. The screech of outrage nearly pinned her to the wall. "Chardonnay? I never asked for Chardonnay. I asked for Blanc de Blancs." The sommelier retired to the wine fridge and grabbed a bottle of [Ruinart](#). "I do apologize, Madame. Here is your Blanc de Blancs."

Odilon de Varine, chef de cave of [Gosset](#), suggests that it's because in the past Chardonnay was rare, and that some of the first growers to come to our attention were on the Côte des Blancs. So when Chardonnay was only about 17 percent of the vineyard (now it's about 30 percent) Blanc de Blancs was exclusive and therefore desirable.

## **Back to black**

With Blanc de Noirs, it's the other way round. Pinot Noir has the cachet; and Blanc de Noirs can and often does contain Meunier which, wrongly, has very little cachet at all.

There are lots of famous Blanc de Blancs. Salon, Ruinart and Taittinger Comtes de Champagne are beautiful, compelling wines, at the very top end of the market. But more, shall we say affordable, Blanc de Blancs can have less complexity than a blend of Chardonnay with Pinot Noir and perhaps Meunier. Blanc de Noirs, on the other hand, can be too solid, too muscular; in the traditional Champagne blend Chardonnay gives freshness, Pinot Noir gives structure, and Meunier gives fruit. Take any of those components away and you have to compensate with clever blending. With pure Pinot Noir the shoulders can be too big, the structure too solid and square, for real elegance. The quest, with 100 percent Pinot Noir, is for finesse and aroma.

Odilon de Varine, who launched a 100-percent Meunier from Gosset a couple of years ago and, last year, a pure Pinot Noir, says that to get roundness on the palate with Pinot Noir it has to be very ripe. "My idea was for a fresh, pure Blanc de Noirs, so I used Chardonnay lees for freshness and minerality. My idea of Pinot Noir was to keep the aim of Champagne, which is saltiness and chalkiness. You have a choice: you can make a big, tough wine or a fine one. It depends on the winemaker."

What he means by "using Chardonnay lees" is a traditional technique Varine picked up from the winemakers his winemaking parents knew: you add Chardonnay lees to the first fermentation of Pinot Noir, and it gives Gosset's Grand Blanc de Noirs – 100 percent Pinot Noir – its lovely elegance.

William Deutz took a different approach to Blanc de Noirs, and released, first, [Hommage à William Deutz Parcelles d'Ay](#), from two Ay vineyards, Côte Glacière and Meurtet, and then bottled them separately in the 2012 vintage. Côte Glacière is rich, almost opulent – it's a warm site in spite of its name – and east-facing Meurtet is tighter and fresher.

### **The power of Pinot**

Showing particular aspects of Pinot Noir is one way of handling the grape: Philipponat does this with its [Mareuil-sur-Ay Extra Brut](#) vintage wine, from three parcels at the top of its fine single vineyard, Clos des Goisses. The clay in the soil here gives generosity, plus eight years on the lees; its other vintage Blanc de Noirs has five years on the lees, and both have some oak vinification. Again, it's the need to round out the power of Pinot, helped by the floral character and finesse of Mareuil-sur-Ay.



© Getty Images | *The village of Verzenay provides all the grapes for the new cuvée.*

Any grower with vines in the Pinot Noir villages of the Montagne de Reims or the Aube, or in the Meunier-focused Marne Valley, is likely to make a Blanc de Noirs – although, like Deutz, they may not care for the term Blanc de Noirs.

There is the powerful, saline Maillons from Ulysse Collin. Alexandre Bonnet, AR Lenoble, Benoît Lehaye, Besserat de Bellefon, Boizel, Egly-Ouriet, Eric Rodez, Gaston Chiquet, Geoffroy, Henri Abelé, Jacquesson, Leclerc Briant, Mailly Grand Cru, and Nicolas Maillart all make examples I have enjoyed at various times.

Billecart-Salmon has its rare [Le Clos Saint Hilaire](#). But when Veuve Clicquot set out to make [Grande Dame](#), its prestige cuvée, 100 percent Pinot Noir, it had to settle in the end for 92 percent Pinot Noir and 8 percent Chardonnay; even though the Pinot comes from the northern part of the Montagne, it still needed the extra freshness and aroma of Chardonnay.

## **Blanking the noir**

Which brings us, and not before time, to Bollinger. The new wine, called PNVZ15, is intended to be a baby brother for [Vieilles Vignes Françaises](#), that rarest of rare wines.

This new wine is not meant to be rare; in a few years volumes will equal those of Grande Année, although they're not quite there yet because making this wine required all sorts of rearrangements. More barrels, for example – half this wine is vinified in barrel, compared to 15 percent in Bollinger's non-vintage Special Cuvée. So another 1000 barrels had to be bought. (They come pre-used, from Bollinger-owned Chanson in Burgundy, so there's no problem with new oak flavors.) Then they had to make sure they had enough reserve wines in magnum: 20 percent of the blend is reserve wines, from years back to 2009, blended with base wine from 2015. They keep buying new Pinot Noir, vineyards, too, two to four hectares every year, to add to their existing 104ha (out of a total 178ha) of Pinot Noir.

This solves one of the problems of pure Pinot Noir Champagne: it needs age. Florent Nys, chef de cave at Billecart-Salmon, reckons his Clos Saint Hilaire needs 15 years plus before it's ready. But that's a vintage wine, and PNVZ15 is non-vintage, so the maturity can come with blending. This is not intended to need further aging, and is glorious now: exotic on the nose, with notes of stone fruit, redcurrant and spice; a soft texture, very complex palate and a saline finish. It's a taut but rich wine, fresh and succulent.

It's from a single village, Verzenay. The clue is in the name. And it came about when cellar master Gilles Descotes set his team a challenge: everybody had to produce a 100 percent Pinot Noir blend from a single village, and the best would be chosen by blind tasting.

The winner turned out to be Descotes' own blend – but look, the tasting was blind, say the team. It wasn't rigged. Honest.

How do you get such complexity from a single village? By blending. Bollinger has 38 different plots in Verzenay, all with different exposures, and on four different soil types. That's quite a lot to play with. And when you add in different vinifications – some in oak, some in steel – and reserve wines, you are constructing something in three dimensions. You can add more or less structure according to the slope, the ripeness and the soil.

Ripeness is the start of everything, they say. "We did a lot of trials, and we know from making Vieilles Vignes Françaises what Pinot Noir is like when it is ripe." Verzenay tends to be less ripe than Ay, where the VVF vines are located, and the result is a less Burgundian wine than VVF, and a more Champenois one. They give elegance by using only the first pressing, the cuvée, and not the polyphenol-rich tailles, and by selecting the facets of Verzenay they want to show.

And, as I say, the words "Blanc de Noirs" do not appear anywhere.

"Blanc de Noirs can mean Pinot Noir and Meunier, so this is more than Blanc de Noirs," they say. "Its name is its code name in the cellar. We like code names: we have RD, 007..."

The next release, which will appear next year, will again be from a single village, but it could be any village. But it will certainly be Pinot Noir. Just hiding in plain sight.