

CHAMPAGNE AR LENOBLE: IN A CLASS OF ITS OWN

With its unique diversity of vineyards, a sensitive winemaking approach, and some truly superlative wines, the family-run house in Damery, which last year celebrated its 100th anniversary, eludes easy categorization, says **Tim Hall**

Champagne AR Lenoble is now an exciting beacon in any survey of the Champagne horizon. This high-class small family house has crept into a privileged niche of perception that avoids the epistemological schizophrenia dividing current attitudes to Champagne, be it on the part of critics, trade professionals, or consumers. This often implied dichotomy rates most “big Champagne” *grande marque* brands as generally superior, certainly “classic” compared to the wines of boutique family houses and top grower domaines.

I once asked Denis Saverot, editor of *La Revue du Vin de France*, why they published separate evaluations of leading house Champagnes and single-estate (“grower”) Champagne. He replied, “There are, nowadays, two realities in Champagne. On the one hand, the big houses selling millions of bottles worldwide, and on the other, artisans selling between 10,000 and 30,000 bottles, usually sold in France. [...] To compare the two realities is strongly illogical and unfair.”

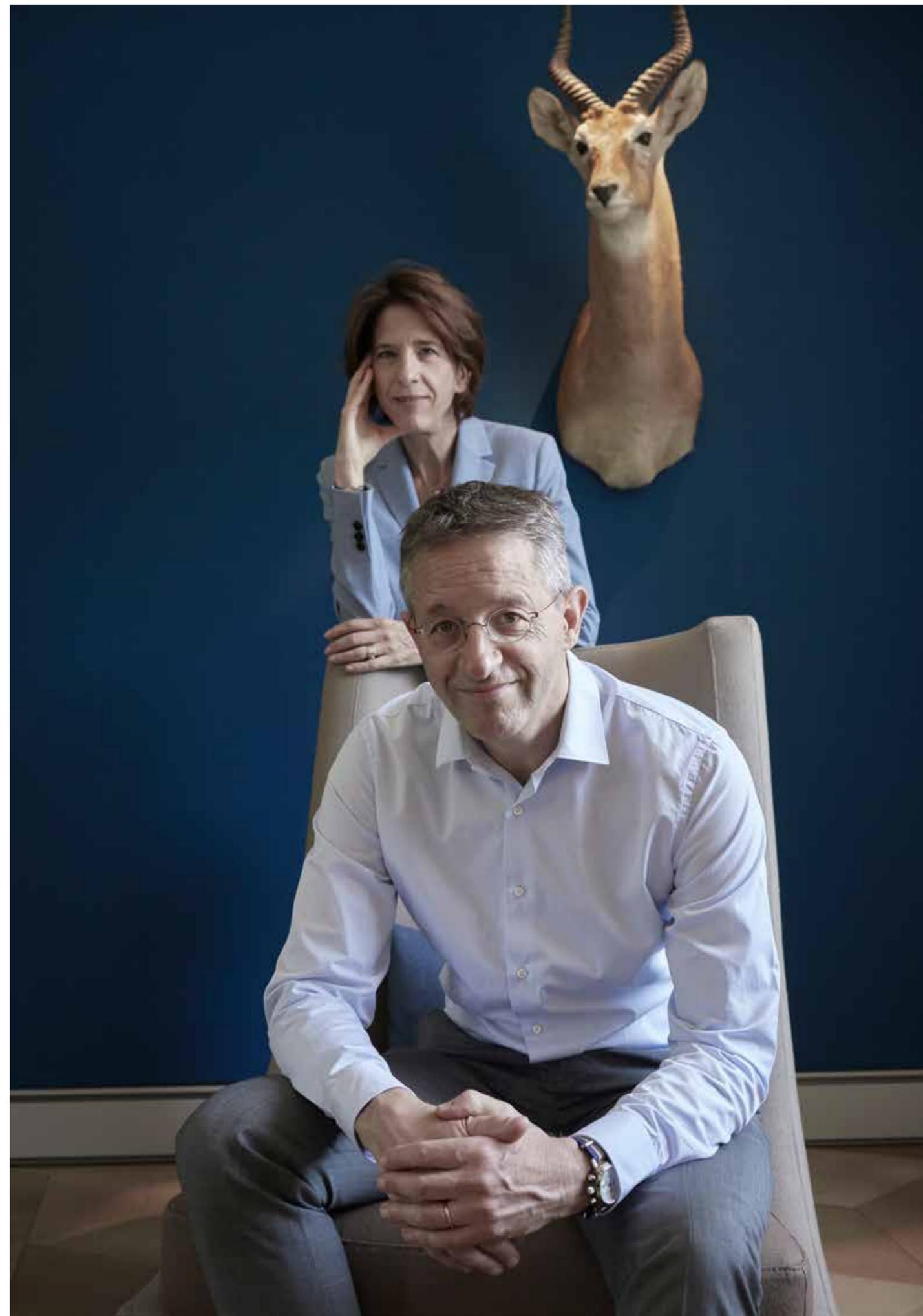
This notion of two worlds—*négociant* houses that mostly buy their grapes and domaines that use only their own, and rarely the twain can rank together—persists for Champagne as for no other wine region. We can often note a current in wine criticism that tends to rate top single estates below houses or to suggest that many grower domaines veer from a desirable mainstream style. Another lurking mind-set in Champagne commentary supposes that small domaines make largely mono-cru Champagnes, limited in their blending scope, while houses make intrinsically superior blends from different districts, the historical mission of the region.

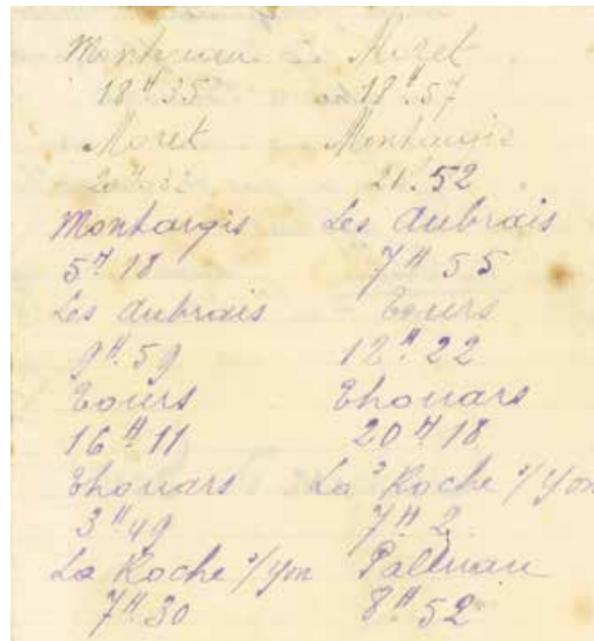
Equally, enthusiasts of small domaines often discount the gorgeous wines with a more terroir focus that big houses can make higher up their ranges, seeing just the mass of their basic brand or entry-level cuvée. The most discerning wine critics, meanwhile, note the rising and fully risen stars in both the house and the grower camps. Yet Champagne’s divide is written into the consumer view, too. Maybe 99 percent of those who say they love Champagne have never heard of Anselme Selosse or Pascal Agrapart, who are towering figures to the other 1 percent.

More recently, some smaller players have managed to break into the sunshine of a broader market presence. But Champagne’s bifurcation accompanies a certain tension in the world’s most successful wine region. The region’s historical and structural imperative is that big houses need grapes and those who grow them should sell them. But successful boutique houses and elite growers who make their own wines disrupt this sacred contract.

Champagne AR Lenoble is a family-owned and run house in Damery that has fortuitously escaped this unfortunate divide in Champagne anthropology. Anne Malassagne and her brother Antoine—ably supported by experienced commercial and export manager Christian Holthausen—have driven this house to wider renown and created a buzz among serious Champagne lovers. It now produces some 350,000 bottles per annum, with more than half of the production exported. It has also gained two stars in the prestigious annual *Revue du Vin de France* ratings, below only nine producers with three stars (Agrapart, Bollinger, Egly-Ouriet, Jacquesson, Krug,

Photography by Romu Durcos





All photography courtesy of Champagne AR Lenoble

All the wines in the range are estate-grown, apart from the brut NV and its zero-dosage sister, making the house more than 50 percent self-sufficient. The glory of the house's vineyards is southeast of Damery in grand cru Chouilly at the northern tip of the Côte des Blancs. These 11ha (27 acres) of Chardonnay are in prized locations

Pol Roger, Louis Roederer, Salon, and Selosse). Curiously, Lenoble was awarded a rather modest 88/100 in the 2019 edition of *Christie's Encyclopaedia of Champagne and Sparkling Wine* even though the authors, Tom Stevenson and Essi Avellan MW, are two of the three judges for the Champagne and Sparkling Wine World Championships, where AR Lenoble won the Chairman's Trophy in 2017 and a gold medal for its 2008 Chouilly Grand Cru in magnum.

Part of this success seems to lie in AR Lenoble's singular avoidance of any easy identification as "big Champagne" or artisanal grower domaine. The distinction lies in vineyard holdings that bring originality to the wines. The vineyard locations of the three principal Champagne grapes evade a predictable typicity. The 18ha (45 acres) of owned vineyards are not, like many Champagne family grower domaines, morcellated around a single village. There is a generous 5.5ha (14 acres) of Pinot Noir from premier cru Bisseuil on the southern flank of the Montagne de Reims, a 10-mile (17km) drive from Damery and the only village planted with a majority of Chardonnay (61 percent) on this Pinot Noir-dominant north bank of the central Marne Valley, which includes the booming grands crus of Aÿ, Tours-sur-Marne, Bouzy, and Ambonnay. The pointed and mineral finesse of Bisseuil—so well suited to Chardonnay, but giving a special linearity to its Pinot Noir—provides this house with a distinctive oak-fermented vintage blanc de noirs (all Pinot Noir), because Bisseuil's Pinot is so different from that of the rest of the Grande Montagne.

Then in Lenoble's home village of Damery it has 1.5ha (4 acres), predominantly Pinot Meunier, most of which is used in the house's NV Brut Intense. All the wines in the range are estate-grown, apart from the brut NV and its zero-dosage sister, making the house more than 50 percent self-sufficient. (Most of the bought-in grapes are Meunier.) I have witnessed Antoine Malassagne's demanding standards at harvest reception, refusing to buy Meunier with rot brought to the press by suppliers. And Damery (with Venteuil) is rated at 89 percent on the *échelle des crus*, the highest rating of any village in the vast main Western Marne Valley, missing premier cru status by just 1 percent.

But the glory of the house's vineyards is more than 6 miles (10km) away, southeast of Damery in grand cru Chouilly at the northern tip of the Côte des Blancs. These 11ha (27 acres) of

Previous spread: Antoine and Anne Malassagne, brother and sister, in Damery. Opposite (clockwise from top left): Joseph Graser; extract from an early press notebook; Armand-Raphaël with his family; Jean-Marie Malassagne with harvesters in Chouilly; baskets of grapes for pressing at the winery in Damery.

TASTING

Intense Mag 16 NV (20% C, Chouilly; 35% PN, Bisseuil; 45% Meunier, Damery; base 2016; 40% reserves; dosage 2g/l)

Floral, light lemon-cream nose; very fresh but immediately a sense of development and richness behind the precision. Really incisive and pithy, too, and a medium finish. Impressive. | 90

Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs Chouilly Mag 16 NV (100% C; base 2016; 30% reserves; dosage 2g/l)

Lemon and lime, very intense agrume, and an elegant, slender weight, really appealing fluidity, and a citric, wet chalky intensity. An exotic note. Really gentle but stately in moving across the palate and into an extended finish. | 92

Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs Chouilly 2012 (100% C, Chouilly; dosage 2g/l)

Pale gold; ripeness and buttery pears and apple on the nose and a lean milk cream-toffee note suggesting oak development. Real persistence on the nose. Creaminess becoming more obvious. Very satisfying and substantial, and there's a play of lemon and orchard fruit, too. Lovely tension and sense of suspension in the structure. | 93

Rosé Terroirs NV Chouilly-Bisseuil NV (92% C, Chouilly; 8% PN, Bisseuil; base 2013; 35% reserves; dosage 3g/l)

Dusty rose petal on the nose. Real cut-through and citrus peel and a sense of tincture. Arresting for a rosé, as it's not elementary and merely red-fruited. Saline, with beguiling forest notes. | 93

Cuvée Gentilhomme Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs Chouilly 2013 (100% C, Chouilly; dosage 3g/l)

A selection from the best parcels in Chouilly. Deep golden. Immediately obvious oak influence, a whisky note, and yet all pure and lean in structure. A warm sensation, vinous, and a vellum prayer-book note to the flavor. Mellifluous, but bounded with a mineral grip and impressive tension. Very long and satisfying. | 94

Cuvée Les Aventures Blanc de Blancs Chouilly - 4th edition (100% C, Chouilly, monoparcels; dosage 3g/l)

The top wine here. Warm and spicy notes of transparent oak vinification. And carrying the gift of good oak fermentation: a sense of airborne texture, waves of deep flavor but carried as if effortless. Enveloping and attractive. Yet built on such an elegant sense of low density and fluidity, very blanc de blancs, and builds a vanilla ice-cream and smiling sensation. An astonishing finesse of silk-fine mousse. Yet forest floor, too, and fleeting early savory notes. A cream cone and biscuit covering. Sensational, even if embryonic as yet. | 96

Chardonnay are spread over many parcels, several of which are in prized locations of the Chouilly terrain: the steeper flanks of the Butte de Saran, the conical Montaigu, and Les Aventures (0.5ha [1.2 acres]), from the last of which the house has, since 1999, made an eponymous *parcelle* cuvée, a blend of two vintages. Among négociants, only Moët and Louis Roederer own so much in Chouilly, and for AR Lenoble its importance is so much greater in the range, representing nigh on two thirds of the estate. Four of AR Lenoble's six top cuvées, above the NV Brut, Zero, and Demi-Sec, are blancs de blancs.

Winemaking

The estate's palimpsest of viticulture and winemaking set onto these strikingly distributed terroirs is based on reducing vigor by large-scale grassing-over for greater flavor intensity and, incidentally, reducing yields by 10 percent overall. The



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viticulture is largely organic, but Anne and Antoine worry about copper and use it as little as possible. In 2012, when it achieved HVE (*haute valeur environnementale*) certification, only Bollinger had preceded it, before it became de rigueur for other top producers. Beehives grace the vineyard verges, and pots of honey are in the goody bags for special guests. The winery in Damery has become an Aladdin's cave of Champagne arts, with Burgundy barrels varying in size and 5,000-liter *foudres*, as well as tanks, and interestingly, traditional Coquard presses are preferred to anything snazzier. The 500 liters of pressed *taille* is discarded, malolactic avoided where possible, and *dosage* generally low. Discussing the winemaking moves and plans with Antoine Malassagne always meets his engineer's pragmatism and refusal of easy formulas. You sense every move is considered, results chewed over (yes, he admits he overused wood at first), and changes carefully planned. Antoine Malassagne is not a natural self-publicist, but neither is he a conservative. He is restless in conversation to discuss new tweaks in his work, and like every scientist, he may dream, but trial and error and a Japanese *kaizen* instinct appear to be the method.

Champagne takes longer to make than almost any other wine, but AR Lenoble seems to have a strategic impulse, not simply patience. In 2010, as a hedge against falling acidities at harvest and perceived climate change, they began to age a proportion of reserve wines in magnum, with an induced light

spritz and under cork. The aim is to preserve freshness in the reserves, both with the magnum effect, the protection of light lees and the pressure of CO₂ against oxygen ingress. These mag reserves were first used in the bottling of the 2014 harvest for the NV wines and were launched in 2018 at ProWein, Düsseldorf, with "Mag 14" badged on the neck.

They make no claim to an original idea, since Bollinger has aged reserves in this way for some time. The challenge here is not so much the operation itself, albeit time-consuming, but one of explanation. Keen Champagne watchers may lap up the detail and the pristine fresh attack of the newly released wines. The principle is essentially simple: keeping older reserve wines in magnum so they stay younger longer. I wonder if the house could convey this to less wine-savvy fans more directly, and maybe mention why it is done under cork and that one third gentle fermentation has been used in the finished NV wines—quite a novelty in Champagne. And tender loving care over years always impresses as the work of craft production: From start to finish, it is eight years before the reserves aged in magnums can be drunk on the market in the finished Champagnes.

Welcome

The magic dust of the independent terroirs and the clear personality one discerns in the winemaking of this house is mirrored uncannily when Anne and Antoine welcome visitors in Damery, be they professional or keen Champagne collectors.

The large walled corner compound on the village's roundabout, imposing if unprepossessing, suddenly gives way to a charming courtyard with reception and tasting rooms that ooze Parisian urbane chic more than the corporate *hauteur* of Champagne's bigger houses or the bland countertops of many growers. The ambience is not threatening, Anne and Antoine are very interested in what you say, and you feel their joy that you have made the trip and their pride in showing you a bit of Champagne's *l'art de vivre*.

Above all, they take deliberate steps to open up an international network far wider than French wine-media people or lay enthusiasts. I remember how they sponsored and organized a detailed professional visit for the CIVC's Champagne Ambassador candidates in 2013, drawn from nine countries. And they have welcomed the international Magnum Club of leading women wine producers from a global spread of estates, organizing their weekend in Champagne. More recently, they hosted the Fine Minds for Fine Wines international seminar, which created Nicole Rolet's ideas exchange Areni Global. And for several years they have run a *portes ouvertes* during the annual Champagne grower jamboree Les Printemps des Champagnes. Making the 45-minute drive to Damery from this intensive tasting-packed week in Reims, you might think unlikely. But their rolling tasting seminars each day are packed with cosmopolitan visitors.

Anne and Antoine also travel to meet their customers and make more friends. I remember well a lunch in 2015 at Le Gavroche in London, which has poured AR Lenoble as the house Champagne for many years, where they served a Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs Chouilly Collection Rare 1979, and they brought 1996 magnums of this wine to show La Fête du Champagne held in London in November 2017.

History

Joseph Graser fled Alsace and the Germans in 1870, during the Franco-Prussian war, to settle in his wife's town of Epernay in Champagne. His son Armand-Raphaël began what seems to have become a very AR Lenoble tradition of changing places, changing profession, and changing names. I wonder if this is why the current proprietors of this small house seem so adaptive, shrewd, and creative in steering their ship today, with not a little pride in their past. Armand-Raphaël's father died at 41, forcing the young man away from medicine as a career, and he became a grape broker based in Dormans in the far west of the Marne Valley. After the war, his family settled in Damery, much closer to Epernay, and, along with broking, set up as a Champagne producer, based in the same property the house occupies today. But in 1920 he paid heed to the fate of giant Champagne Mumm, which had been sequestered by the French state in 1914 when war broke out, because its owner was German, albeit Francophile. Although French, the name Graser had difficult German connotations in 1920. The nimble solution was to rename the house AR (for Armand-Raphaël) Lenoble, a cheeky wink at elite status that, happily, has become true. The labels had the slogan, "Noble Champagne, Champagne Lenoble."

Above: Anne and Antoine use a range of stainless-steel tanks and wooden vats. Opposite: Anne and Antoine pay tribute to their great-grandfather Armand-Raphaël.



Like his father, Armand-Raphaël died suddenly, in 1947, and after a period in the hands of his son (another Joseph), it was his grandson Jean-Marie Malassagne from Chouilly who took over in 1973, hence the vital Chouilly connection. His wife Collette also brought the Bisseuil vineyards into the house. It is his children, Anne and Antoine, who run the house today.

Coming into their inheritance, however, was not quite so simple. Sharing an onerous career as Champagne owner and as a senior physician in Reims, their father Jean-Marie planned to sell up in 1993. Anne, at 28, a complete beginner in Champagne matters, decided to switch her career in finance with L'Oréal in Paris to take over from her father. Three years later, after graduating as a biochemical engineer, her brother Antoine joined her. "Steep" might not quite describe the learning curve I imagine. When I discuss their memories of coming from Paris to tackle the largely unknown, they are modestly quiet for the most part. "You just get on with it," says Anne. "You can think too much," says Antoine. "Sometimes you just have to go for it."

The wines

I have enjoyed the wines of this house consistently over the past ten years. Recently, I had the chance to taste through six of the latest cuvées with Anne Krebiehl MW, although the notes above are wholly mine. Both of us found distinctly superior Champagnes, vinous and wonderful in their textural finesse, precision, and distinctive array of flavor. ■