

A Steep History in the Sun

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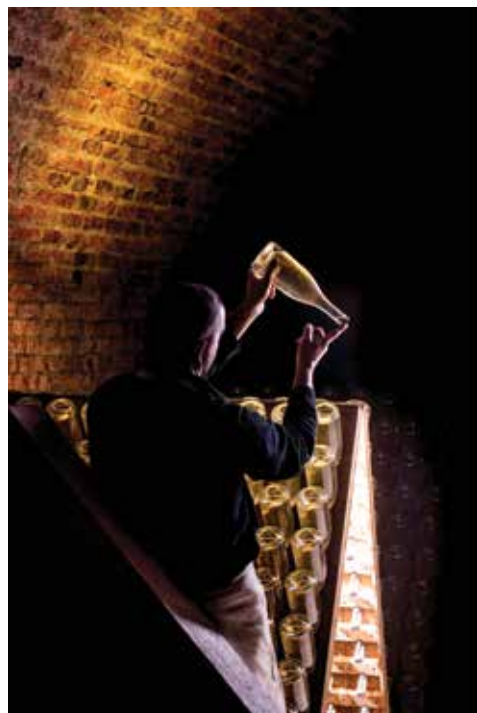
Photos: Philipponnat



An Afternoon
with François
Philipponnat



Each cork at Philipponnat is marked with disgorgement date — a small detail, but a sign of transparency and trust. It invites drinkers into the process, not just the product.



Philipponnat is one of the few Champagne houses using both barrel and stainless steel in the first fermentation, adjusting not by formula, but by feel and harvest character.



Each vintage release at Philipponnat undergoes blind panel tastings internally — a tradition that has continued across generations, involving both winemakers and family.



The slope doesn't seem daunting at first. But by the time you've walked down from the headquarters in Mareuil-sur-Aÿ to the base of Clos des Goisses, you understand the commitment it takes to work here. The 45-degree incline, fully exposed to the sun, demands not just labor but faith — the kind passed down through generations. It was here our visit began.

François Philipponnat met us at the gates of the Clos — a living monument to single-vineyard champagne, six hectares planted with precision, just above the Marne. As we looked across the steep, immaculate rows, he spoke not in grand marketing terms, but with a measured intimacy. This vineyard, acquired by his grandfather in 1935, is not a brand. It's a legacy — cultivated, not owned.



Royal Réserve Brut: Orchard fruit meets subtle spice; gently wooded structure gives breadth and lift — a Brut with backbone, not just charm.



Royal Réserve Non-Dosé: Chalk and citrus define this cut-glass expression — lean, racy, and true. Nothing to hide behind, and nothing missing.

He had recently become a father, and shared a family ritual: at birth, a newborn's lips are touched with champagne. Not to celebrate, but to initiate. That, perhaps, says more than any press release ever could about the Philipponnat family's relationship with their wine.

We followed him through the facilities, room by room — the quiet chill of the cellars, the soft hiss of fermentation tanks, the tight scent of wood in the aging rooms. It's among the most photogenic maisons in Champagne, but never self-conscious. Each detail serves a function. The walls are not there to impress. They're there to insulate bottles from noise and haste.

The house maintains one of the region's deepest reserves of perpetual wines — an unbroken lineage of vintages married with new harvests, enriching their non-vintage expressions. "Réserve Perpétuelle" sounds lyrical. In practice, it's a demanding form of discipline — a liquid archive requiring consistency, patience, and trust in your base.



The Clos des Goisses vineyard is planted with both Chardonnay and Pinot Noir — in a region where most parcels are one or the other, this blend-by-planting is unusual and deliberate. It is divided into 14 micro-plots — each one harvested, pressed, and vinified separately before any blending occurs.



Le Léon vineyard, used for one of the vintage cuvées, was named in records from 1690. It's one of Champagne's few historic lieux-dits still bottled under its own name.



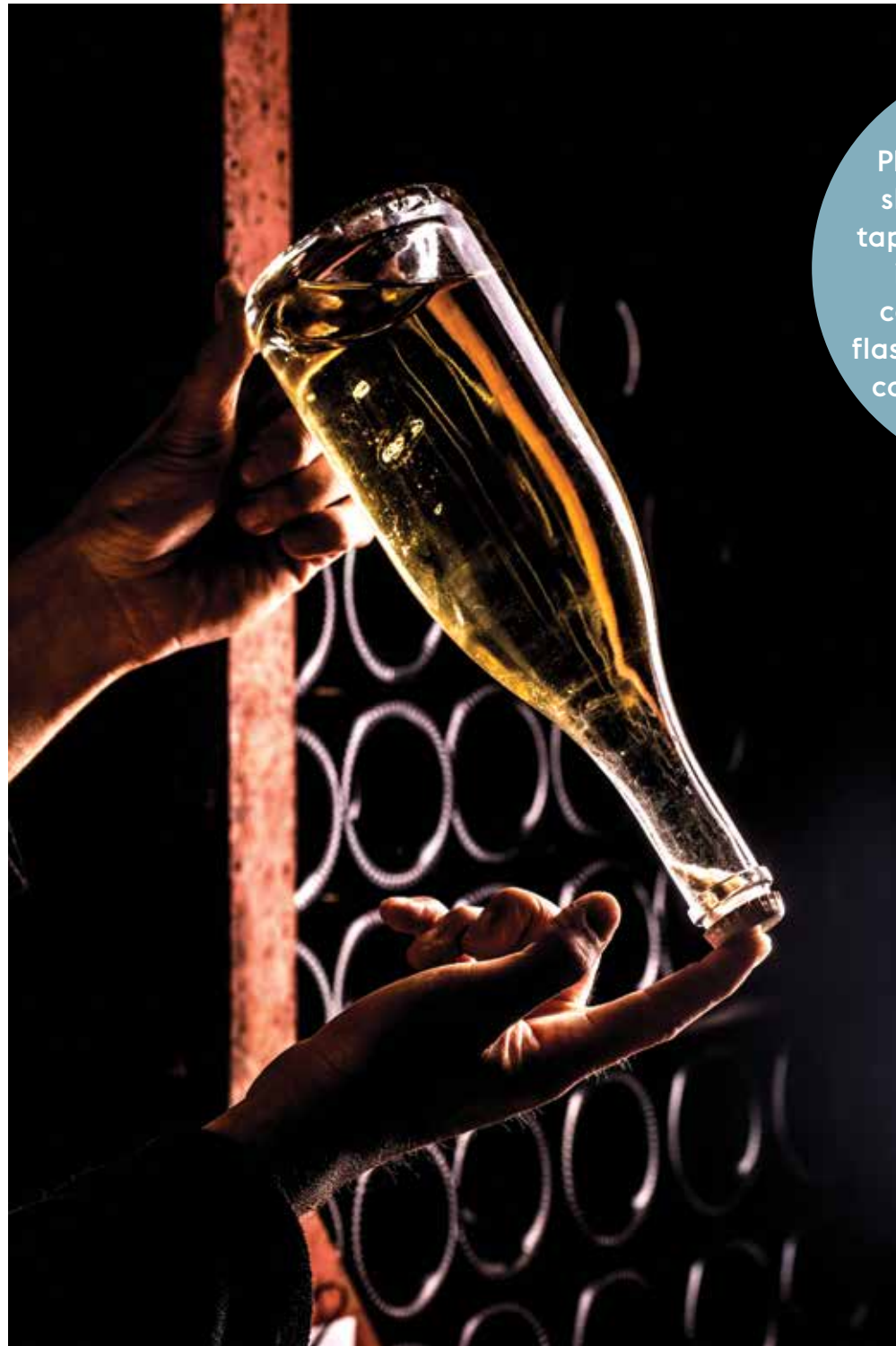
The family archives contain original maps of Mareuil-sur-Aÿ vineyards from the 18th century, still referenced today to maintain the historical layout of the parcels.



Blanc de Blancs: All finesse — citrus peel, white flowers, and a saline edge. Precise and vertical, like a limestone spine wrapped in silk.



Blanc de Noirs 2019: Juicy red fruit balanced by soft tannins and spice; generous but elegant — like a silk scarf with a bit of grip.



Philipponnat's bottle shape, slightly more tapered than the norm, is inspired by 18th-century champagne flasks once used in royal courts across Europe.

While many estates expanded east or west, Philipponnat doubled down on verticality — their caves plunge deep beneath the chalk hillside to regulate naturally.

The house uses lower-than-average sulphur levels in its wines — not for trend, but because their clean fermentations and cellar hygiene allow them to do so confidently.



Aging times are long — far longer than the legal minimum. Even the non-vintage wines are aged for three years on lees; the vintage cuvées, far more. This patience shows. The wines carry weight not from alcohol, but from time. From absorption, not extraction.

And then there's Clos des Goisses — not just the name on the label, but the house's anchor. With chalk soils and full southern exposure, it's a plot that behaves more like a Burgundian cru than a Champagne vineyard. It ripens fully. It ripens fast. And it demands judgment. Every row is harvested by hand, every parcel vinified separately. No single recipe fits.

This is not an estate chasing trends or leaning on legacy. It's an operation built on choices — agricultural, oenological, philosophical. If there is elegance here, it's not the polished kind. It's the kind that endures pressure, season after season.

Philipponnat is not theatrical. But that doesn't mean it lacks intensity. Like its wines, the maison's presence is firm, structured, and unmistakably human.



1522 Extra Brut 2019: Focused, textured, and sleek. Citrus oil, toast, and crushed rock. Not flashy — just composed.



Le Léon 2015: Subtle power. Darker fruit, forest floor, and mineral grip. Long, layered, and grounded.

Clos des Goisses 2014: Deep yet lifted. Candied lemon, oyster shell, and ripe stone fruit. A wine that carries the weight of its slope with ease.

