

Champagne Lilbert-Fils Cramant



The written record has the Lilbert family cultivating vines around its hilltop village of Cramant in 1746, and it's probably a fair bet that they were there sometime before that (the oldest part of their 23-foot-deep cellar dates from 1712). The record further shows that as early as 1907 the family bottled its own wine for commercial sale. Despite such longevity, the house of Lilbert is tiny: it farms a mere 3.5 hectares of vines (which translates into 8.6 acres).

Bertrand Lilbert and his father Georges—who's in his eighties but still helping his kid out—make only grand cru blanc de blancs from 100% Chardonnay. Their annual production averages 2,300 twelve-pack cases. To put this in perspective, the house of Moët & Chandon pumps out *25 million cases each year*. Unlike Moët, the Lilberts make all of their wine from their own vineyards, which break down into 15 parcels in the grand cru villages of Oiry (10% of their total plantation), Chouilly (30%), and Cramant (60%) on the Côte des Blancs. Recent replantings have brought the average vine age down to 30 years.

Note that Cramant should not be confused with *crémant*. *Crémant* once used to be a term reserved for a style of Champagne with less pressure--and indeed the village of Cramant has a tradition of making wine in such a style, so much so that Lilbert's Perle was once labeled as *Crémant de Cramant*. But those days are gone and now *crémant* legally refers to all *méthode Champenoise* wine made within France but outside of the Champagne appellation."

The Côte des Blancs is a ridge that begins just outside of Epernay and runs north-south. Vineyards grow primarily on its east-facing escarpment, making the resemblance to Burgundy's Côte d'Or a rich parallel (although here the soil is tuffeau and chalk rather than marl and limestone, and the ridgeline is much shorter). Bertrand Lilbert began working with his father in the 1990s and made one change. The flanks of Cramant have long been known as one of the truly great terroirs of the Côte des Blancs, known for full-bodied, chalk-rich Chardonnay. The very name Cramant refers to *Mont de Craie*, or mount of chalk, so why not, Bertrand thought, honor this legacy? Moreover, Cramant and its neighboring village of Avize are the historic heart of the Côtes des Blancs. Thus he made the 1995 vintage Champagne from 100% Cramant fruit, saving the fruit from the other village parcels for the two non-vintage wines. The result was superb, and he has made the practice standard for his vintage wine.

The farming culture here is *lutte raisonnée*, ie sustainable. All of the wines are made in steel vats and all undergo malolactic fermentation. The bottles are riddled by hand in a deep, hand-dug chalk cellar, and the wine is disgorged without freezing. The house style emphasizes fine mousse and intense aromas of lime, green apple, hay, and dried apricot. These are beautiful expressions of often intensely mineral Chardonnay, with elegance, subtlety, and gorgeous fruit that is not dressed up by overtly sweet dosages. As Peter Liem observes in his book *Champagne*, Lilbert's vintage wine is "an expressive, age-worthy champagne, and one of the best examples of pure Cramant being made today."

<http://www.champagne-lilbert.com/>