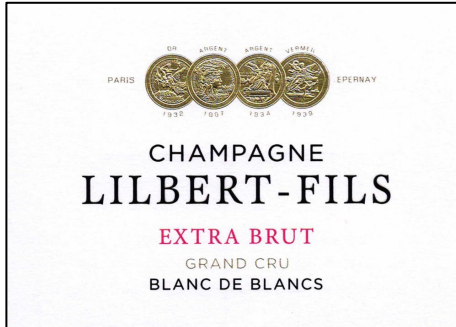


Champagne Lilbert-Fils Cramant



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 2,200 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 12-mile ridge that begins just outside of Epernay and runs south from the river Marne. 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 ridge is barely over a quarter of the Côte d'Or's length). Its northern head is capped by the forested Butte de Saran and the village of Cramant straddles an eroded part of the ridgeline at the Butte's southwestern border. Cramant's vineyards spill over either side of the ridge, but the eastern flank is the larger area and forms a broad amphitheater that ties into the vines of Chouilly to the north and Avize to the south. It's worth noting that Cramant and neighboring Avize were the first villages to be awarded grand cru status; they are the historic heart of the Côte des Blancs. Cramant has long been prized for the chalky complexity and creaminess of its wines, and with vintage 1982 Georges Lilbert bottled his first 100% Cramant wine. The very name Cramant refers to *Mont de Craie*, or mount of chalk, so why not honor this legacy? He continued the practice thereafter, as has Bertrand, who took over in 1999: Vintage Lilbert et Fils is always 100% Cramant fruit from two vineyard sites.

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/>