

{ our man in champagne }

Alexandre Penet
in the cellars at La
Maison Penet.

PHOTO: MATHIAS QUENCEZ, COURTESY OF LA MAISON PENET

A Man with a Plan

ALEXANDRE PENET CREATES “TERROIR CHAMPAGNES” AT LA MAISON PENET

by Jiles Halling

Cuvée Diane Claire is the cuvée-de-prestige in the Penet-Chardonnnet range.



FOR MOST PEOPLE WORKING IN ONE OF THE RELATIVELY FEW INTERNATIONALLY

famous brands of Champagne, their job is the result of a career choice rather than a calling.

It's very different for the nearly 5,000 small, independent Champagne makers that are to be found in each and every one of the 320 villages that make up the Champagne region. For some of these makers of artisan Champagne—often called “grower Champagnes”—there's never any question about what they are going to do with their lives; it's difficult to tell your parents 'No thanks' when a century or more of tradition would die out if you didn't take over. But many of today's more innovative young Champagne makers did break away, for a while at least, from their roots in order to expand their horizons and to drink in new ideas.

This is what lies behind the increasing quality and diversity of grower Champagnes, and it's exactly how Alexandre Penet came to be at the head of La Maison Penet, described by a leading French wine review as “One of our best discoveries in La Montagne de Reims for 25 years.”

Born into a family with roots in Champagne going back over 400 years, Alexandre grew up watching his grandfather and father make wine, but he went to college to study engineering and, after qualifying, left Champagne to work overseas in Brazil and in Africa for a number of years in industries that have nothing to do with winemaking. Just for good measure, he also found time to gain an MBA from the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business.

When Alexandre did decide to come back to Champagne, he had a clear vision of what he wanted to create: 'terroir Champagnes' that are the embodiment of the place they come from.

Finding the sense of place was relatively easy; all the Penet family's six hectares (15 acres) of vineyards are located in the two neighboring villages of Verzy and Verzenay, two of just 17 villages in Champagne to be given the top designation of Grand Cru.

Creating a unique style though required Alexandre to make two bold decisions. Unlike most Champagne makers, he decided to avoid malolactic fermentation and what's more, to use little or no dosage, both of which, he believes, can mask the true flavor of the fruit.

There are two separate ranges under the umbrella of La Maison Penet.

The Penet-Chardonnnet range features extra-long aging, partially in oak barrels, and includes two single-plot cuvées, the only zero-dosage Grand Cru rosé on the market and the top-of-the-range Cuvée Diane Claire, a blend from the 2002 harvest. These are almost hand-crafted Champagnes for real enthusiasts and are available in limited quantities only; they're ideal for matching with fine food. Each bottle is individually numbered and bears the date of disgorging.

For more casual drinking there's also the Alexandre Penet range, which offers five more Champagnes, available in slightly larger quantities, that provide the ideal introduction to low-dosage Champagnes for those less familiar with this vibrant, fresh style. **51**



The Alexandre Penet range provides an ideal introduction to low-dosage Champagne.

La Maison Penet Champagnes are imported by Boutique Wine Collection, Philadelphia, PA. To discover more about La Maison Penet go to champagnelamaisonpenet.francefinewines.eu.