Prestige Champagnes are usually a producer’s best — and most expensive — wine. But with the trend towards vineyard wines, special cuvées and multiple bottlings, there’s cause for confusion. DWWA Champagne Regional Chair Richard Juhlin demystifies the category, and names his top 20 from a landmark tasting.

We’re all familiar with magnificent and prestigious names like Belle Epoque, La Grande Dame, Cristal, Winston Churchill and Dom Pérignon. But what really defines a prestige Champagne? Champagne may be the world’s most controlled wine region, but when it comes to how a prestige Champagne should be constructed, there are no rules at all, which can be very confusing.

Prestige Champagne is almost always the wine that each producer considers their top of the range, but no law prevents them from packaging a simple, standard Champagne in a showy bottle and declaring that this is the jewel of the house. There is a worrying trend that some producers, because of the popularity of prestige Champagne, are choosing to make excessive amounts of prestige wine and minimising or excluding their vintage Champagne for commercial reasons. Fortunately, it is almost always the case that the prestige Champagne really is the producer’s best wine.

Prestige Champagnes are also usually the producer’s most expensive wines and should be the essence of the very best you can achieve. A typical prestige Champagne is made exclusively from grand cru grapes from the oldest vines. The ageing period in the cellar is maximised and there are numerous examples of very late disgorged wines. Some use oak barrels, and the presentation is the most luxurious possible: ornate boxes of fine woods with specially designed bottles.

Dom Pérignon 1921, launched in 1936, must be regarded as the first prestige Champagne. Roederer’s Cristal was admittedly sold even earlier to the Russian Tsar, but the first vintage to come on the market was the 1945, not sold until the 1950s. The first vintage of Taittinger’s Comtes de Champagne was 1952.

Further confusion around the concept of prestige Champagne arises from the fact that several of the most famous Champagne houses now make vineyard wines – almost like some growers – in exclusive small amounts, and at exorbitant prices. For example, if you look at Billecart-Salmon you will find that its most expensive wine is the vineyard wine Clos St-Hilaire, although the classic prestige wine is the Cuvée NFB. If you ask Krug it will answer that all its wines are prestige Champagnes, but the proud flagship is not Clos du Mesnil or Clos d’Ambonnay but the non-vintage Krug Grande Cuvée, even though, paradoxically, it is the cheapest wine. Philipponnat, on the other hand, has had a clos wine as its prestige Champagne since the 1940s; salon makes only one wine, and Jacquesson now specialises almost exclusively in clos wines and lets the disgorgement date determine whether the prestige epithet should be used or not. Bollinger does the same with its RD despite the fact that its rare gem is Vieilles Vignes Françaises. A few houses make two ➢
prestige Champagnes beyond the rosé versions of the same high quality but in different styles such as Deutz (William / Amour) and Perrier-Jouët (Belle Epoque / Belle Epoque Blanc de Blancs).

The tasting
Since 2012 I’ve organised a tasting each May of virtually all quality Champagnes in a given category. The inaugural year focused on blanc de blancs, where Krug’s Clos du Mesnil 1998 took top honours; last year was rosé, where Dom Ruinart’s 1988 and Cristal’s 2002 shared the plaudits. This year we tasted 109 white prestige Champagnes from 105 leading producers. Wines were tasted blind over two days by me and a panel of eight fellow Champagne Club members. The scores shown on the following pages are for the wine’s potential quality, with the overall jury’s score (averaged out after eliminating the highest and lowest score) shown in brackets after my own.

In previous years my scores have been less in accordance with the overall jury’s scores. This time it gratifyingly shows an almost uncanny consistency. The scores show the big names have a firm grip on the top placements, and that styles, as well as vintages, can vary greatly. Oak barrels, steel tanks, vinification style and grape composition all fortunately play a minor role. Highlights were found across all styles – a reassuring sign that prestige Champagnes will continue in their diversity.

After a slump in the slightly weaker 1997 and 1999 vintages, the legendary Salon is back in top shape with its cool, seductive and sublime, ultra-stylish 2002. Krug need not lament that it sent Grande Cuvée, and can celebrate a well-deserved score for its inimitable depth and incredible Pinot complexity.

The king of growers, Anselme Selosse nowadays makes cult vintage and extravagant clos wines from individual grand cru parcels, and his solera...
wine, Substance (made of wines from 1986 to the mid-2000s) took us all by surprise. Louis Roederer receives much criticism for releasing its Cristal prematurely, but the 2006 is already incredibly elegant and won high scores all round. Two powerful 2004s excelled: we all loved the lavishly rich La Grande Dame, while the ultra-intense, acacia- and coffee-scented Dom Pérignon divided the group more. For me the Dom Pérignon was probably the biggest positive surprise.

Vintage performance

To succeed in getting a 2005 into one of the top spots is a great achievement. The vintage generally lacks elegance and lives almost exclusively on its fat, almost cloying fruit. The premier Champagne of the 2005 vintage is undoubtedly Taittinger’s Comtes de Champagne with its lavishly rich exoticism that, ever so slightly, resembles the world-famous 1976 in youth. The Amour de Deutz 2005 impressed in a similar style.

The famous 2002 vintage showed its beautiful side in the form of Piper-Heidsieck’s coffee-roasted Rare, while Dom Ruinart, Belle-Epoque Blanc de Blancs and Pommery’s Cuvée Louise are all going through a closed period. Even with Bollinger RD you should wait a while to enjoy the full gastronomic potential. The growers’ counterpart, Egly-Ouriet, produced a lush Pinot masterpiece made from vines planted in Ambonnay in 1946. Neighbours Paul Déthune, RH Coutier, Marguet and Billiot also impressed in a less bombastic style.

A number of wines from the relatively ordinary vintage 2000 shone, benefiting from their age. Meanwhile, two 1996s (Bollinger and Billecart N.V) drowned a little among the competition – they are extremely pleasant to drink now but even better in magnum. I have previously tasted Henriot’s 1998 Enchanteleurs in a purer and better condition, likewise Jacquesson’s 1995 DT, while Charles Heidsieck’s 1995 is always intensely pleasurable.

In Bouzy, Clouet flopped this time, but despite a modest placement, I will forever remember the delicious aromas of raspberries and meringue in George Vesselle’s Cuvée Juline. For future Bouzy moments I choose, as usual, Paul Bara’s still youthful cloudberry- and passion fruit-scented Comtese Marie de France 2002. In Verzenay, Michel Arnould reigns with the far too young Mémoire de Vignes, and in Aube, nothing beats Michel Drappier’s Grande Sendrée.

Among the unknown newcomers in the peripheral corners of Champagne, I was most pleased with Bordaire-Gallois and Coessens. The most impressive wines made of Pinot meunier grapes came from Loriot, José Michel and Dehours. Palmer’s crowd-pleasing mellow roasted Amazone took first place among the coops, closely followed by slow starter Cuvée Echansons from Mailly.

At the core of the Marne valley there were fewer peaks this time. The famous Clos des Goisses always scores poorly in blind tastings with its difficult-to-interpret, youthful and sullen personality. Decanted and enjoyed with food, the impression is the reverse. Giraud’s Fût de Chine, Roger Brown’s Reserve Familiale, Gosset-Brabant’s Cuvée Gabriel and Goutorbe’s Special Club are all, despite their placings outside the top 20, fine examples of what Aÿ can convey in its best moments. Across the river, I am most fond of Tarlant’s heavily oaked Cuvée Louis.

In the Côtes des Blancs, we find a plethora of affordable, high-class prestige Champagnes.
Juhlin’s top 20 prestige Champagnes


Just a half-point difference from a perfect score might make you believe that this is a fast-maturing Salon. Unfortunately, it will take almost 20 years before its full maturity is reached. In fact, my high score is probably quite rare since the wine is extremely young right now. Personally I have come to love the youthful expression where all instruments are playing their own tune separately. Mouthfeel is velvety and aromatically the walnut oil and the salty minerals are playing against the apple blossom. Here we have a purity and brightness that sharpens all senses. This magic wine reminds me a lot of my first meeting with legendary 1992 Salon. Drink 2020-2040 Alcohol 12.5%

Dom Pérignon 2004 19.25 (97) Jury 18 (93) £95-£140 Widely available from specialist merchants

Yet another masterpiece created by Richard Geoffroy. Unmistakable Dom Pérignon style with unparalleled silkiness throughout the palate. The mousse is worthy of its own chapter and the elegance is striking. Nice minerality and floral notes with citrus overtones. Slightly short now, but time will fill in the small gaps in the beginning of life. This time it tasted intensely toasty and fairly close to the 1983 when I tasted that vintage for the first time at the same age as the 2004 is now. Drink 2014-2035 Alc 12.5%

Louis Roederer, Cristal 2006 18.25 (97) Jury 18.5 (95) £120-£185 Widely available via UK agent Maisons Marques et Domaines

Fantastic from the start. A colossal power of beautiful ruminating Pinot maturity. It’s like chewing on the ripest grapes from Ay and Verzenay. At the same time ultra stylized: unmistakable Cristal essence of peach and mango sweetness, pineapple, coconut, vanilla, sprightly acidity and citrus blossom. Many similarities with 2002 but with a clearer Pinot touch. Drink 2016-2030 Alc 12.5%

Taittinger, Comtes de Champagne 2005 19.25 (97) Jury 18.5 (95) £95-£155 Harrods, Lee & Sandeman, Majestic, Solent Cellar, Vino

A truly wonderful wine from the start but slow to develop in the glass this time. As usual, Taittinger succeeds very well in warm, acid-weak vintages, when the neighbours’ wines often appears flat and simplistic. Despite the fact that the acidity is not particularly accentuated here either, the vineyards’ aromatic citrus fresh touch leaves a fresh, uplifting side to the creamy, fat smoothness. The finish is certainly chalky and elegant, but it raises to heavenly heights with a 1976-like butterscotch soft, warm, sweet flavoured embracing pillow. Drink 2014-2025 Alc 12.5%

Jacques Selosse, Substance NV 19 (96) Jury 19 (96) £238.90 Hedonism

So much Selosse Intense and personal. Our bottle was very mature with a fat, oily character. Loads of different nuts, sesame oil, Istanbul market spices and dried sweet fruits. Huge! Drink 2014-2016 Alc 12.5%

Krug, Grand Cuvée NV 18.75 (95+) Jury 19 (96) £120-£160 Widely available from specialist merchants

Because it’s been blended from 10 different vintages and 47 different wines from 25 crus, Krug is a super multi-vintage of its own kind. The extremely tough acidity, together with the heavy, rich Krug aromas, are unique. This bottle had a fabulously complex nose and palate, dominated by nuts and honey. The aftertaste was acidic, long and majestic, like a great symphony. Drink 2014-2020 Alc 12.5%

Pol Roger, Cuvée Sir Winston Churchill 2000 18.75 (95) Jury 18.5 (95) £190-£245 Bay’s, Hawkshead, Storr Not at all excelling on release, but at our tasting the greatness and maturity showed in an aristocratic way. Nice smoky complexity, fat and already mature with strong liquorice and dark chocolate notes. Drink 2014-2020 Alc 12.5%


So silky-smooth and with such intense nut flavor! The toastiness is there, but it’s swimming in an oily nectar which prevents it from really making its way forward as it does in many other vintages. Pretty mousse and uplifting charm. Drink 2014-2018 Alc 12.5%

Charles Heidsieck, Demi-Sec 1990 18.5 (95) Jury 18.5 (95) £95-£138.50 Excell Wines, Houghton Wines, Hedonism, Millsims, Storr, The Wine Society

Less mature, but still a fantastic wine. Drink 2014-2025 Alc 12.5%
spread across my features when Ployez-Jacquemart’s Lisses d’Harbonville 1999 was presented – an extremely delicate creation with the finest lime blossom bouquet, and the elegance of Dom Ruinart. I was really out on that one with my guess. Also noticed in this premier cru area was the impressive Oger is playing most loud for the moment in Puisieulx. Painfully youthful but already completely harmonious.

The biggest disappointments this time? Happily, I can barely remember, and would prefer to revel in the fireworks of enjoyment that this tasting brought, celebrating the love and dedication of producers which underpin the magic of their prestige Champagnes. To achieve such myriad styles and level of quality from about 30 villages is nothing short of miraculous.  

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‘To achieve such myriad styles and level of quality is nothing short of miraculous’

Juhlin’s top 20 prestige Champagnes (continued)

**Perrier-Jouët, Belle Epoque Blanc de Blancs 2002** 18.5 (95) Jury 18 (93)
£298-£302 Hedonism, Millesima, Nickolls & Perks
Beautiful oily concentration, but also an elusive style that not everyone will like at the moment. Meaty tones mixed with petroleum, citrus and meringue. Leave for a few years and enjoy the upcoming harmony. I thought it was magical. **Drink 2016-2020 Alc 12.5%**

**Piper-Heidsieck, Rare 2002** 18.5 (95) Jury 17.75 (92)
£135 Hedonism, Nickolls & Perks
Looks like becoming another legendary Piper in the same style and league as 1988, ’76 and ’55. Already focused and concentrated. Tough acids might scare some but sublime coffee and biscuity complexity is building up slowly. Sensual wine for all occasions. **Drink 2016-2025 Alc 12.5%**

**Veuve Clicquot, La Grande Dame 2004** 18.5 (95) Jury 18.5 (95)
£110-£130 Davy’s Wine Shop, Hawkshead Wines, Hedonism, Millesima, Slurp
Same fantastic velvety super harmonious style year out and year in. The 2004 is polished, gorgeous and smiling in a ultra-sophisticated way. Extremely intense Chardonnay from Oger is playing most loud for the moment in the symphony. **Drink 2014-2022 Alc 12.5%**

**Claude Cazals, Clos Cazals 2002** 18.25 (94) Jury 18 (93)
N/A UK [www.champagne-claude-cazals.net](http://www.champagne-claude-cazals.net)
A real winner. Classic build-up and a serious walnutty deep concentration from one of the most exiting plots in Champagne. **Drink 2016-2026 Alc 12.5%**

**Deutz, Amour de Deutz 2005** 18.25 (94) Jury 17.5 (91)
£109-£142.80 Exel, Hedonism, Millesima, Oakbridge Wine Co, Soho Wine Supply, Swig, The Drink Shop, Vinivisen
The beautiful wine lives on a lovely generosity and also wonderfully delicious easy drinkability. A highly appreciated and popular wine. As usual, I grumble about the lack of airiness between the various components of the dense 2005s. **Drink 2014-2020 Alc 12.5%**

**Egly-Ouriet, Blanc de Noirs Vieilles Vignes NV** 18.25 (94) Jury 16.75 (89)
£98.50 Lea & Sandeman
Grapes from Pinot vines cultivated in 1946 give the wine an extra concentration and weight. The fruit is rich, soft and dense, and the potential for cellaring is huge. This wine gets better and better with each release. It’s a Selosse-like, exotically oaky, organically influenced giant of a Champagne. The flavour layers are fantastically generous and multi-faceted. **Drink 2014-2040 Alc 12.5%**

**Bollinger, RD 2002** 18.25 (94) Jury 17.75 (92)
£118-£180 Widely available from specialist merchants
A closed, grassy nose at first but underneath there’s a restrained beautiful sophistication and youthful charm. Distinct but faint RD tones towards mushroom, truffle and mineral saltiness. Slowly blooming in the glass and not unlike a young RD 1975, so at some point this wine will breathe sweetest chocolate and nut symphony. **Drink 2016-2018 Alc 12.5%**

**Ruinart, Dom Ruinart 2002** 18.25 (94) Jury 18.25 (94)
£125-£155 Harrods, Hedonism, Millessima, Nickolls & Perks
Dom Ruinart 2002 is a blessed creation with 72% Avize and Chouilly and more surprisingly 28% Chardonnay from Pinot villages like Sillery and Puissieuix. Painfully youthful but already completely harmonious. All the bits and pieces are there in small portions and time will make them stronger and deeper. **Drink 2016-2028 Alc 12.5%**

**Laurent-Perrier, Grand Siècle NV** 18 (93) Jury 18 (93)
£100-£135 Widely available from specialist merchants
A youthful but beautiful Grand Siècle that will be even better with further age. With extra time in the glass we found clean notes of bedsheets dried in the summer wind together with light green apple notes and toast. Refreshing attack and soft lingering beautiful mousse. **Drink 2016-2022 Alc 12.5%**

**Pierre Peters, Les Chétillons 2007** 18 (93) Jury 17.75 (92)
£60 Solent Cellar
One of the best grower Champagnes every vintage. Always with great purity and respect for its unique terroir. Notes of mandarin and white flowers mixed with grilled and petroly notes. A very sturdy wine indeed. **Drink 2018-2025 Alc 12.5%**

**Ployez-Jacquemart, Lisses d’Harbonville 1999** 18 (93) Jury 16 (86)
N/A UK [www.ployez-jacquemart.fr](http://www.ployez-jacquemart.fr)
A surprise, with its big house style oozing with toasted and acacia-like scents. Soft and sensual with a beautiful, sublime finish of the purest Madagascar vanilla. **Drink 2014-2016 Alc 12.5%**

**R&L Legras, Cuvée St-Vincent 2000** 18 (93) Jury 17.75 (92)
£60.95 Lea & Sandeman
Very dark, powerful wine a bit unexpected from a light soil like Chouilly. Individual style with nuttiness and dry, intense, mineral-impelled tones. Still promising, and already with fine oiliness. **Drink 2015-2020 Alc 12.5%**

For full details of UK stockists, see p102