



# Crème de la crème

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 >



**Left: some of the top-scoring wines in Richard Juhlin's tasting of prestige Champagnes**

**Right: Dom Pérignon 1921, launched in 1936, is regarded as the first prestige Champagne**

Photographs: Thomas Skovsø. With thanks to 28-50° Marylebone (www.2850.co.uk) and Hedonism (www.hedonism.co.uk), Lea & Sandeman (www.leaandsandeman.co.uk) and Corney & Barrow (www.corneyandbarrow.com) for the loan of the bottles



**Above: Anselme Selosse, of Jacques Selosse, is considered the king of grower Champagnes, says Juhlin**

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).

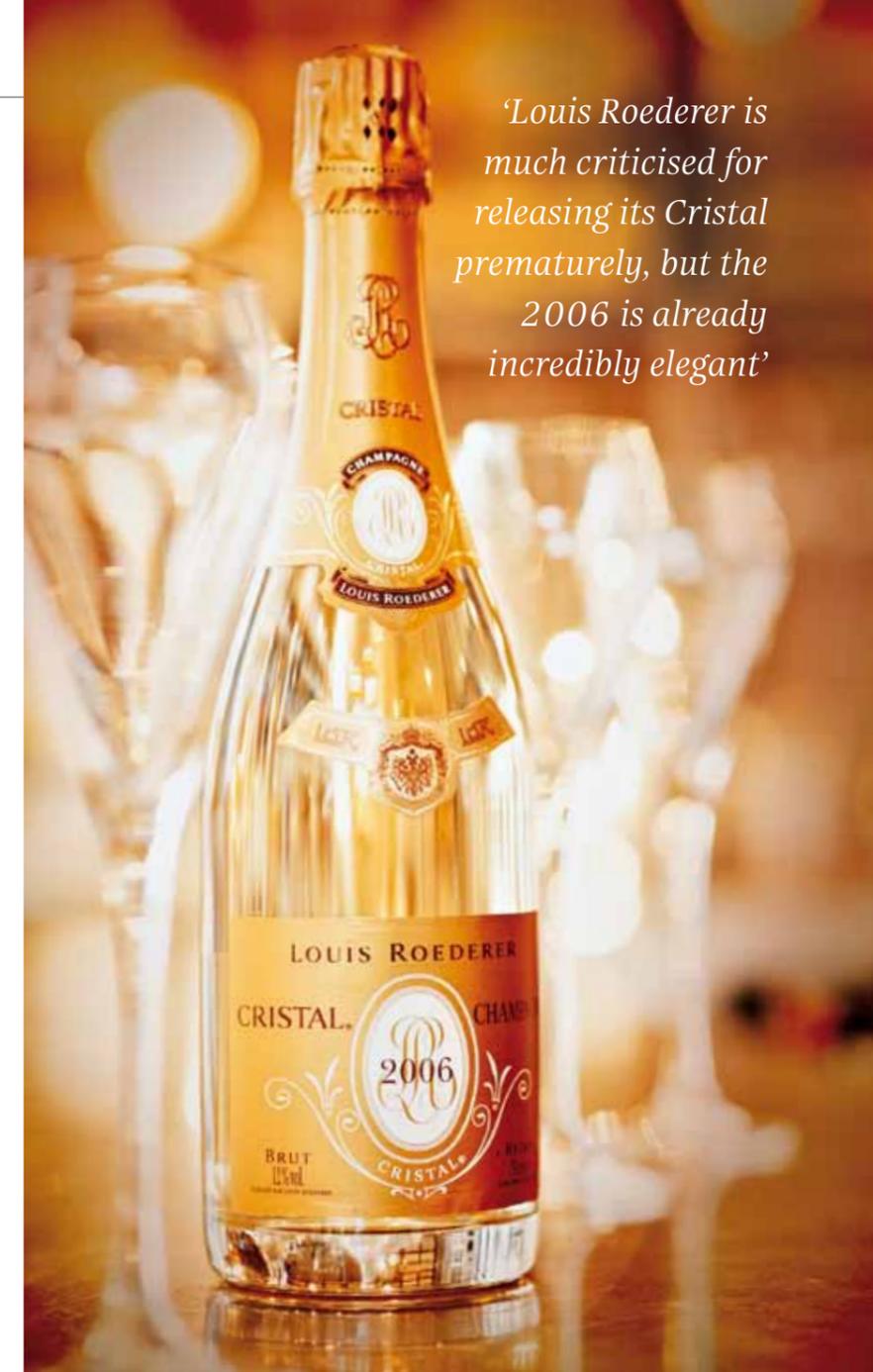
### The tasting

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 ➤

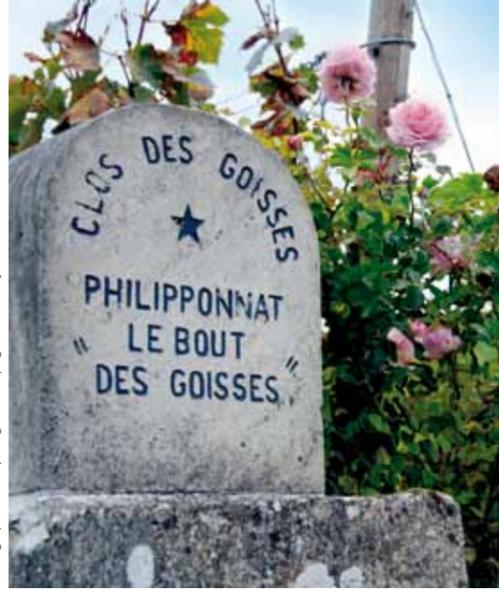


*'Louis Roederer is much criticised for releasing its Cristal prematurely, but the 2006 is already incredibly elegant'*



**Above: the 2002 vintage of Salon's Cuvée S was the top-scoring wine in Richard Juhlin's prestige Champagne tasting, described as 'magic', and reminiscent of the legendary 1982**

Photographs: Serge Chapuis, Thomas Skovsønde



Photograph: Gita Capeling at Champagne Discovery



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 1999s (R Lalou and Billecart NF) 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



**Above: Pierre-Emmanuel Taittinger, president of Champagne Taittinger**

*'Taittinger's Comtes de Champagne 2005, with its lavishly rich exoticism, resembles the world-famous 1976 in youth'*

**Above: Pol Roger's Cuvée Sir Winston Churchill is one of the most well known prestige Champagnes**

**Top left: Juhlin says Philipponnat's Clos des Goisses often scores poorly in blind tastings, but should be enjoyed with food to better appreciate its unique style**

modest placement, I will forever remember the delicious aromas of raspberries and meringue in George Vesselles' 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 Bordaie-Gallois and Coessens. The most impressive wines made of Pinot Meunier grapes came from Lorient, 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 Chêne, 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 Côte des Blancs, we find a plethora of affordable, high-class prestige Champagnes. ➤

Mesnil-sur-Oger is home to Pierre Peters with the ultra-pure Lés Chétillons, Gonet's Belem Nita, Pascal Douquet's Vieilles Vignes and a promising Confidence 2008 from newcomer Vergnon, and neighbour Guy Charlemagne with the toffee-rich Mesnilésime 2004. Agrapart and De Souza in Avize did not shine as brightly as I expected this time, but from neighbouring Cramant we, as usual, enjoyed a smiling Bonnaire, Diebolt-Vallois' stately Fleur de Passion and a toasted yet crisp magnum of Gimonnet's Collection 2005. Besides the top-rated St-Vincent from Legras, Chouilly fielded a dark horse in the top 50 with the limited-production Prestige de la Cave 2006 from small grower Michel Genet.

Most brightly in the Côte des Blancs shone the magical Clos Cazals 2002 from Oger. This lesser-known prestige wine has only been made since 1995 and is reminiscent of Salon. Amazement ➤

Photograph: Dyrwin



Clos Cazals in Le Mesnil-sur-Oger is one of a number of walled vineyards in Champagne

## Juhlin's top 20 prestige Champagnes



**Salon, Cuvée S 2002** 19.5/20 (98/100pts) **Jury result** 19 (96) £158-£380 **Corney & Barrow, Latimer Vintners, Nickolls & Perks**

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 1982 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** 2014-2030 **Alc** 12.5%

**Louis Roederer, Cristal 2006**

19.25 (97) **Jury** 18.5 (95) £120-£183 **Widely available via UK agent Maisons Marques et Domaines**

Fantastic from the start. A colossal power of beautiful rumbling Pinot maturity. It's like chewing on the ripest grapes from Aÿ and Verzenay. At the same time ultra stylish: 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, Lea & 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** 2014-2030 **Alc** 12.5%



**Pol Roger, Cuvée Sir Winston Churchill 2000** 18.75 (95+) **Jury** 18.5 (95)

£110-£145 **Davy's, Hawkshead, Slurp** Not at all exciting 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%

**Charles Heidsieck, Blanc de Millénaires 1995** 18.5 (95) **Jury** 18.5 (95)

£105-£138.50 **Exel Wines, Hawkshead Wines, Hedonism, Millésima, Slurp, The Wine Society** So silky-smooth and with such intense nut toffee! 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% ➤

spread across my features when Ployez-Jacquemart's Liesse 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 but slightly overloaded Coeur de Cuvée from Vilmart, Léclapart's l'Apôtre and Cattier's delicate Clos du Moulin with its grassy, gooseberry scents and creamy texture. Lassalle's Special Club 2006 from Chigny-lès-Roses is even creamier, more voluptuous and irresistibly vanilla-scented.

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. **D**

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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, Millésima, 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 **Aic** 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 **Aic** 12.5%

**Veuve Clicquot, La Grande Dame 2004** 18.5 (95) **Jury** 18.5 (95)  
£110-£130 **Davy's Wine Shop, Hawkshead Wines, Hedonism, Millésima, Slurp**  
Same fantastic velvety super harmonious style year out and year in. The 2004 is polished, gorgeous and smiling in an ultra-sophisticated way. Extremely intense Chardonnay from Oger is playing most loud for the moment in the symphony. **Drink** 2014-2022 **Aic** 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 the sweetest chocolate and nut symphony. **Drink** 2016-2018 **Aic** 12.5%

**Claude Cazals, Clos Cazals 2002** 18.25 (94) **Jury** 18 (93)  
N/A UK **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 **Aic** 12.5%



**Deutz, Amour de Deutz 2005** 18.25 (94) **Jury** 17.5 (91)  
£109-£142.80 **Exel, Hedonism, Millésima, Oakbridge Wine Co, Soho Wine Supply, Swig, The Drink Shop, Vinvixen**  
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 **Aic** 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 **Aic** 12.5%



**Ruinart, Dom Ruinart 2002** 18.25 (94) **Jury** 18.25 (94)  
£125-£155 **Harrods, Hedonism, Millésima, 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 Puisieulx. 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 **Aic** 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 **Aic** 12.5%

**Pierre Peters, Les Chétilions 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 **Aic** 12.5%



**Ployez-Jacquemart, Liesse d'Harbonville 1999** 18 (93) **Jury** 16 (86)  
N/A UK **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 Madagascan vanilla. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Aic** 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 **Aic** 12.5%

*For full details of UK stockists, see p102*