

> The Savile Row-suited owners of Grandes Marques Champagne houses produce millions of bottles a year, poured regularly at polo matches, grand prix races and charity balls. In contrast, visionary winemaker Anselme Selosse doles out a mere 5,000 cases annually to those in the know.

Now a cult figure in the wine world, Selosse has spent more than three decades managing his family's Domaine Jacques Selosse in Avize, 150 kilometers (93 miles) east of Paris, and rebelling against the region's conventions. A wine heist in March, during which 3,700 bottles worth about 300,000 euros (\$405,000) were stolen from the *domaine's* cellars, demonstrates the fevered demand for Selosse Champagnes. (The thieves also

Photograph by MARTON PERLAKI

Drinks
Bubble Economy
How Anselme Selosse became
the toast of Champagne
By Elin McCoy





SELOSSE'S GREATEST HITS

Initial Blanc de Blancs Brut

This vibrant all-chardonnay Champagne, a blend of three villages and vintages, is the most available of Selosse's *cuvées* and the best introduction to his style. Its fresh, crystalline character, a mix of ethereal lemon and a pronounced chalkiness, seems to come alive in the glass.

\$150

Substance Blanc de Blancs Brut

This silky, all-chardonnay mix of 20 vintages exudes power and opulence while remaining bright and not at all heavy. Its toasty, nutty notes; sensual spices; lemony fruit; hints of *crème brûlée*; and deep smoky minerality make it one of Selosse's most distinctive Champagnes.

\$250 to \$280

Lieux-Dits La Cote Faron Blanc de Noirs Extra Brut

This polished, seductive, all-pinot noir *cuvée* from a steep slope in Ay is a blend of 12 vintages from 1994 through 2005. The most multilayered and savory of all Selosse's single-vineyard Champagnes, it has many dimensions of flavor, including red berries, licorice and sweet herbs.

\$400 to \$500

Lieux-Dits Les Carelles Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut

This 100 percent chardonnay from the village of Le Mesnil-sur-Oger shows fantastic elegance. Powerful aromas of warm, ripe pears burst from the glass, and the wine's zingy acidity; intense flavors of salt, lemon and chalk; and long finish are dazzling.

\$400 to \$500

took 16,000 labels that the winemaker worries will be used for counterfeits.)

Invariably dressed in a down vest over an open-collared shirt, Selosse is a mix of philosophical thinker and inquisitive farmer, with a craggy face, rumpled hair and rough, work-worn hands accustomed to tending vines. "My addiction," he says, "is smoking Lucky Strikes in

memory of the great designer Raymond Loewy, who made the logo." (Luckily, all those cigarettes haven't impaired his palate, he says.)

Traditionally, Champagne has been all about blending grapes from vineyards in as many as 100 different villages to create a consistent house style. Big winemakers like Moët & Chandon buy from thousands of small growers who own almost 90 percent of the region's vineyards. When Selosse's father, Jacques, bought a tiny parcel of vines in 1947 and founded his eponymous *domaine*, he sold to well-known Champagne house Lanson.

Today, more and more of these growers are keeping the best grapes for themselves and making their own artisanal, estate-grown Champagnes. Selosse's father was an early convert, in the mid-1960s. But it was Anselme who made the *domaine's* reputation in the 1980s and 1990s, after taking over management of the estate.

"At the beginning of my career, with such a small *domaine*, I couldn't make a lot of wine, so I focused on developing intensity," Selosse says. One of his signature experiments was blending wines from many different years using a version of the *solera* system developed for Spanish sherry. Each year, Selosse removes 22 percent of the wine aging in a barrel for bottling and replaces it with the same amount from the newest vintage.

The current release of his Champagne, labeled Substance, for instance—an all-chardonnay *blanc de blancs*—contains a bit of all the years from 2005 back to 1986. The blend of 20 vintages gives the wine richness and opulence, with aromas of honey and dried flowers and deep, complex flavors of allspice, toasted brioche and hazelnuts.

By combining vintages, Selosse aims to magnify the *terroir* of the wine—"the salts and minerals" specific to the place where the grapes were

grown—to "reveal the overall truth of the vineyard," he says. The goal for his single-vintage Champagne, on the other hand, is the opposite—to show the character of the *terroir* in the year during which the wine was made. The 1999, for example, is dense yet filled with energy. It's chalky, citrusy and very sleek.

Substance and the 1999 vintage are among the dozen current releases I sample at a collectors dinner in May at Manhattan's NoMad Hotel organized by Selosse's importer, Rare Wine Co. The highlights prove to be his six *lieux-dits* (single-vineyard) Champagnes, each from a different *grand cru* vineyard. (Selosse owns 7.5 hectares, or 18.5 acres, across 47 parcels, almost all in *grands crus* villages—a significant investment when you consider that 1 hectare costs more than €1 million.)

Three of the *lieux-dits* are chardonnay based and three are pinot noir based, but all are vinified in much the same way: Fermentation takes place in barrels with indigenous yeasts. Minimal sulfur is used. And the wine remains on the fine lees, or dead yeast, for years until bottling.

Now 59, Selosse says he's consolidating his ideas. "We were one of the first to dare to follow biodynamic viticulture," he says. "But we abandoned these practices when they became fads and just a recipe." Early on, some critics panned his wines as too oaky, and he's since pared the note way back. He still harvests grapes riper than most producers do, which gives his Champagnes more roundness and richness. With their vibrant energy, deeply expressive mineral character and multilayered flavors, they seem more like great white Burgundies with bubbles than the sort of reserved, harmonious Champagnes one typically encounters.

Selosse's latest experiment involves a different kind of hospitality: In 2011, he and his wife, Corinne, opened an elegant 10-room hotel and restaurant called Les Avises in his home village of Avize. The neoclassical chateau, which dates from 1820, was once home to another Champagne house, and Selosse recently relocated his winemaking operation there. "Les Avises is a complement to our Champagne," he says. "Healthy living with taste, culture, passion, hedonism and the Latin idea of *carpe diem*."

Think of Selosse as a wine poet, composing for connoisseurs who are looking beyond the standard luxury bubbles for something with personality, emotion and soul.