

Champagne Henriot - Expect the Unexpected

A traditional Champagne maison adapts to climate change under a dynamic winemaker



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Champagne is all about tradition. The house style is reflected in each release of a non-vintage cuvée, designed to be as consistent from year to year as vintage variation allows. But times change, and even the most traditional champagne maisons must adapt. So when the Henriot family was looking for a new cellar master in 2019, they had both tradition and innovation in mind. They found Alice Tétienne, a Champagne native in her early 30s working as part of the winemaking team at Krug, and “invite me to join the adventure,” as she puts it.

What a beautiful way to describe a job offer. If only we could all be so lucky to consider our jobs adventures.

Tétienne joined Henriot in February 2020, just before the pandemic. The timing allowed her to concentrate on her new adventure without distractions, she told me during a recent visit to Washington, D.C., as part of a four-stop U.S. marketing tour

“There were no cars driving by, and we were able to concentrate on the vineyards,” said. (No pressure to do marketing trips and explain herself and every cuvée to various wine writers, either.)



Champagne Henriot Cellar Master Alice Tétienne. Photo: [Champagne-Henriot.com](https://www.champagne-henriot.com)

There have been distractions since. The Henriot family sold the winery in 2022 to the Artémis Group, owners of Château Latour, which then sold it a year later to Terroir Vignerons de Champagne (TEVC), owner of Nicolas Feuillatte and Abele 1757, among other houses. Henriot had been self-importing to the United States, but is now aligned with Majestic Imports, a venture of Jackson Family Wines. With new owners and a new importer, marketing trips are back on the schedule for Tétienne.

But she has remained focused on her charge to transition the winery to the age of climate change.

“When the family Henriot invited me to join the adventure, they wanted to respect family traditions but also become more modern, to increase transparency, and to rethink the wines because of climate change,” she said.

Tétienne is precise in appearance and manner as well as her words, yet a twinkle in eye hints of ambition. Her résumé includes almost as many degrees in viticulture and enology as Henriot has cuvées, but she clearly isn't just following text books.

“We are scientists, but we need to be creative,” she says.

Creativity means transparency with new labels conveying more information, including the vintage that makes up the majority of a non-vintage cuvée, the grape varieties, and the grams of sugar added in the dosage at disgorgement.

Tétienne said she didn't want to go beyond that with a QR code or such, as her former employer Krug has done, to give information about how many vintages of reserve wines were included, disgorgement dates, etc.

“I don't want to be on my phone,” she said. “I want to enjoy the wine.”

Her work adapting the winery's operations to climate change focuses primarily on the vineyards, a program she calls “Alliance Terroirs.” Henriot's champagnes are derived from 29 cru vineyards, seven of which the winery owns, with 22 grower partners adding to the mix. The vineyards total 120 hectares, in the Montagne de Reims and Côte des Blancs, split nearly evenly between chardonnay and pinot noir, with just a soupçon of meunier. With various plots in each vineyard, that means Tétienne has over 100 wines each vintage to construct her blends.

To adapt to climate change, she initiated an intensive effort to analyze and understand those vineyards. She employs artificial intelligence to assess soil health and vine vigor, allowing her to assess vine health and prioritize and target interventions such as mowing and spraying. She has also begun transitioning vineyards to organic viticulture. A third effort seeks to reduce the winery's impact on the environment through more efficient water use and reducing its carbon footprint.

And she's experimenting with barrels, something Maison Henriot has always avoid "With climate change, the wines have less acidity, and the barrels add tannin and an impression of freshness," she explained. So far, these trials haven't made it into Henriot's main cuvées, but Tétienne said she did make a wine in 2021 that was aged barrels.

That wine is from the winery's L'inattendue, or "unexpected," series. Launched in 2016, L'inattendue is a single vintage, single vineyard champagne. The '21 is still ag on its lees, but we tasted the 2018, a chardonnay from Chouilly. It had a focus that t other blends — and champagnes in general — don't typically have. Tétienne's eyes flared with interest when she discussed L'inattendue. She clearly enjoys looking for exceptional wines during her blending trials that might stand alone.

So when you pop a cork on a bottle of Champagne Henriot, expect a blend of tradit and the unexpected.



Alice Tétienne in Washington. (Photo by our waiter, with my iPhone. Nothing but fancy tech here on the WineLine!)

Here are the cuvées I tasted with Alice Tétienne at the Pembroke restaurant in Washington, D.C.:

Henriot Brut Souverain NV. \$60. This is the house's main cuvée, first developed in 1808 by Apolline Henriot when she established the company. As luck would have it our bottle was from the first cuvée Tétienne oversaw from vineyard to market, with 2020 as the base wine, with 39% reserve wine, mostly from a perpetual reserve start

in 1969. This showed enticing citrus aromas of lime and grapefruit zest and a fine elegant bead of bubbles. We also tasted a previous bottling the restaurant had on its list, with the base wine from 2018, a riper vintage. It was more fuller bodied and mouthfilling, with a creamier texture. It was a good reminder that even non-vintage cuvées can display vintage variation as well as the hand of the winemaker.

Henriot Blanc Souverain NV. \$80. 2018 base, so this would have been finished by Tétienne. All chardonnay from 12 vineyards in the Côte des Blancs, showing soft texture and orchard fruit flavors. Good persistence and depth.

Henriot L’Inattendue 2018. \$130. A blanc de blancs (chardonnay) from a single vineyard and single vintage in Chouilly, in the Côte des Blancs. Focused acidity makes this wine seem well-grounded, a purer expression of terroir than a wider blend can. Tétienne made a L’Inattendue from this plot again in 2023, as the site does exceptionally well in warmer vintages. It would be fun to taste them side-by-side when the ’23 is released in a few years.

Henriot Millésime 2014. \$110. A 50-50 blend of chardonnay and pinot noir from which Tétienne described as a “classic” vintage. Age is giving this wine an intriguing spiciness, a hint of fenugreek and turmeric, as if someone in the kitchen was whipping up a curry.

Henriot Cuvée Hemera 2013. \$200. Henriot’s rarest and most prestigious cuvée, first done in 1889 and not made every year. It’s always a blend of six of the house’s historic grand cru vineyards, an equal blend of chardonnay and pinot noir. The 2013 is soft and luminous, seemingly caressing your palate with a warmth that persists long after the embrace.

Henriot Brut Rosé NV. \$80. It’s a rosé. Some still pinot noir is added to a blend of sparkling vintages to give it color. For excitement, though, I’d stick to the Brut Souverain.

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