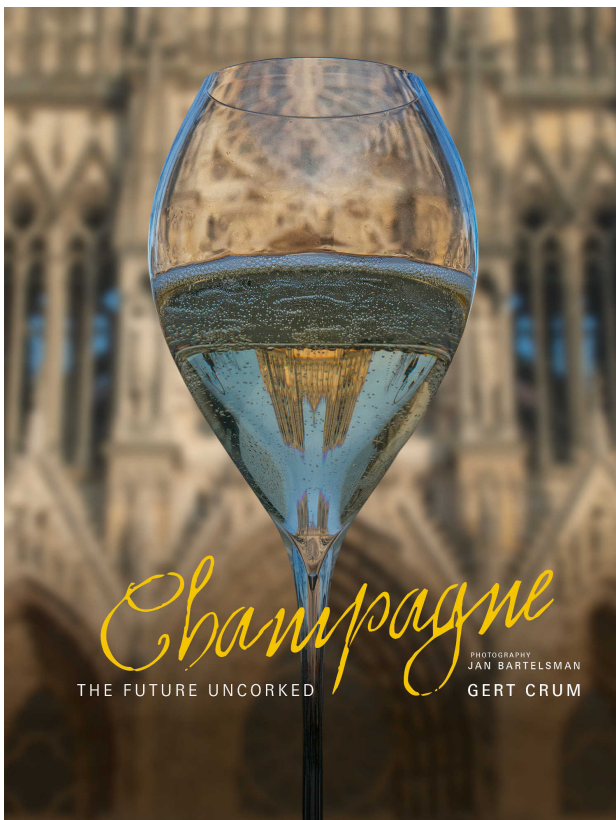




Written by
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Book reviews 2017 – fizz part2

There are four really good books on champagne here, and each one serves a different purpose, gives a different perspective. I have, however, deliberately ordered them with the least controversial first. See [Book reviews 2017 – the guide for more.](#) (as presented from book review three only; Gert Crum)



Champagne

The future uncorked

Gert Crum

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I may have been heard lamenting to Jancis that my problem with all these books on champagne is that they seem to be an extension of the brilliantly polished marketing machine of this most feted of beverages. Of course, writing a book about a wine region is often the by-product of an enormous affection for and admiration of said region, so it's hardly surprising that these authors and lovers of champagne should write books glowing with praise. But after the third book I was beginning to feel a little frustrated. It was like flicking through photographs of celebrity homes in *Hello* magazine – a kind of mesmerising, airbrushed, too-perfect, soulless sameness. I longed for something a little bit real, the grittiness of Champagne.

Along came Gert Crum.

The first thing I loved was the photo on the back of the book jacket, of both the author and the photographer, Jan Bartelsman. Photographers and illustrators do not get enough credit, and it was heartening to see that Crum so overtly shared the glory, not just on the cover but in the preface as well. The book itself is large, heavy and magnificent. Jan Bartelsman has done a superb job with his photography.

It's a book that invites you to open it. It's a pleasure to touch, to look at, and, above all, it's a pleasure to read. But the last, I might add, is because Crum has *not* written a glossy work of adoration.

The second thing I loved about this book is that here, finally, is a champagne specialist who is unafraid to start his preface with, 'While I feel a strong bond, I am critical – I have to be critical. This is why I should declare that, besides the many fine and even beautiful champagnes, there are also many champagnes that are simply passable, and even some that are undeniably bad.' It is evident throughout the book that Crum has no problem with being very critical. He goes backstage, peels back the masks and talks about the things that Champagne The Brand considers impolite, or unworthy of conversation. With unprecedented bluntness, he states: 'There are poor, moderate, good and great producers. There are bunglers and there are artists, among the wine growers and among the houses.'

Gert Crum is a Dutch wine journalist based in Amsterdam. He's widely recognised as a specialist on burgundy and champagne, having written four previous books on the latter. He is a sociologist by training and was a university lecturer, but for the last 35 years he has devoted himself to wine. *Champagne – the future uncorked* was originally written in Dutch and published under the title of *Le Réveil des Terroirs*. The English version has been translated by Patricia Riley.

There are just seven chapters. As with any treatise on the future of something, one must first present the status quo, and Crum tackles this in each chapter, looking at Champagne today, strengths and weaknesses. The first chapter, entitled 'The province of Champagne', is, as you would expect, about the boundaries, the subregions and what makes each of them unique (their vineyards, soils and terroir) and the grape varieties of Champagne. The second, 'The champagne method', is about the making of champagne. Where Crum brings a distinct angle to the subject is his extensive knowledge of Burgundy, and throughout the book he uses Burgundy as an interesting frame of reference, drawing on similarities and differences to give the reader a different perspective. One of his first observations is that the 34,306 ha of Champagne all fall under just one appellation; the 25,500 ha of Burgundy fall into no less than 100 appellations. This despite the fact that Champagne is a mosaic of soils, aspects, and pixelated terroir difference – just like Burgundy – and that Champagne has villages and vineyards (crus and lieux-dits) with distinct characters – just like Burgundy. The first chapter reveals Crum's fascination with the complexity of the Champagne terroir, so often unnoticed by consumers of champagne, and so often ignored by critics.

The second chapter, while being about the winemaking, is not a beginner's guide to how champagne is made. As with Peter Liem's book (see above), this is not for a neophyte who would benefit from flow charts and diagrams. The unwritten assumption here is that the reader is familiar with the basics and ready to get into more depth and detail. Crum tackles head on the delicate matters of high yields, volumes, pulling out of 'old' vines, tailles and cuvées. And as he goes through the production of champagne, he considers, in fascinating detail, the myriad views and methods of different houses/producers, whether it's in regard to pigeage, wood, rosé, reserve/base wines and blending, malo, cuvée and tailles, fermentation, yeasts, crown caps, or the timing of tirage. To a certain extent, you realise that to understand properly how champagne is made, you almost need to forget everything you have learned. The variation on the theme is enormous, and, as Crum says, 'everyone has their own opinion and defends it with fervour'.

He's good at interesting anecdotes and trivia. It's the first I'd heard of André François, local pharmacist, who calculated how much sugar should go into the liqueur de tirage – playing a vitally important and often-overlooked role in reducing bottle breakages. It's the first I'd heard of the concoction of algae, bentonite and kaolin which is added with the tirage to make the lees easier to remove.

Vegan friendly, don't panic; I checked. He writes about the oxidative impact of disgorgement and why this is a contributing factor to the style of Bollinger and Jacquesson. And how beer-brewing technology might be helping champagne producers.

Chapter 3, 'A change in the wind', looks at the foundations shifting under Champagne's heavy reliance of brand image – often at the cost of quality. Crum doesn't mince his words: 'champagne has never been in greater danger than it is today, because other regions and countries have been making great strides in the production of sparkling wine'. He goes on to say that 'it can be cautiously concluded that there is no real difference between an average champagne and a Crémant or a sparkling wine from somewhere else', intimating that the heart of the problem may be because 'tradition in Champagne is mightier than the individual terroir'. One of the other things I particularly liked about this book is that, even though Crum is writing about such a serious and hallowed subject, he is not averse to a good bit of dry Dutch humour. On the subject of village crus, while comparing the ridiculous percentage of premiers and grands crus in Champagne vs Burgundy (31% of total vineyard area in Champagne, 15% in Burgundy) and the questionable boundaries (entire villages qualifying for grand cru status), he comments wryly, 'all the grands crus are equal – but some are more equal, just like the pigs from George Orwell's *Animal Farm*'. And like Peter Liem, he sees the growers leading an increasing emphasis on terroir, 'le réveil des terroirs', putting pressure on the big houses, many of whom are highly resistant to zonage (a project in place to map the micro-terroirs, crus and vineyards of Champagne) and to fragmentation. Blending suits them – it gives them huge flexibility and power.

As well as barging in on the taboo topics of yields, boundaries and fragmentation, he paints a rather grim picture of sustainability, a story of half-hearted trying, and not trying hard enough. He talks about the low number of organic producers and vineyards compared with the rest of France, the high percentages of producers using bee-killing glyphosate in 2016, the 'staggering number of grape producers who are not looking to improve the quality of the vineyard soil or vines'. There's a rather sobering picture of a vineyard worker dressed, it seems, for chemical warfare, as he/she applies chemicals on the vines. And while there are houses who do care about the environment and are actively farming that way (Roederer, the house with an artisan mindset, is praised), it is once again the growers who are spearheading the slow awakening. He dares to say that 'there is rivalry, tension and also a degree of rancour between the two groups'.

Crum takes a look at another quiet change taking place: that of the trend to focus on grape varieties – little-known grapes that are staging small-time comebacks and varietal wines. But he also argues that this is not the strength of Champagne. 'In fact', he concludes, 'it does not make much sense to talk about the different percentages of each variety in a particular champagne ... it would be better to think in crus'.

'Style of champagne' is the topic of the fourth chapter, and this is not about non-vintage, vintage, rosé and the various degrees of dosage. It's a much more interesting investigation into what makes one wine delicate, and another powerful; and what affects the style of a house/grower champagne, including their location. He presents the case of the big blenders on one side, and the terroiristes on the other. He also considers whether it's winemaking, grape varieties or terroir that has greatest impact on the style of champagne. He also considers various attempts to define these styles of champagne, from the CIVC's slightly cringeworthy categories of 'spirit', 'heart', 'body' and 'soul', to other more (or less) successful classifications by the likes of Parker, Ed McCarthy, L'Amateur de Bordeaux and Karen MacNeil.

Each of these is audited, and then Crum presents his own, surprisingly detailed and extensive table of classification using three categories: 'Light, graceful and fruity', 'Soft, generous and creamy', and 'Vinous, broad and mature' (although he does allow for crossovers between these categories). He classifies 76 'Brut Sans Année' (as he calls non vintage) champagnes into these categories using eight factors affecting style (crus, varieties, malo, wood, dosage, etc). It makes for an excellent tool, not only for food and wine matching, but also as a buying aid. If you like Perrier-Jouët but dislike Bollinger, it takes a quick whizz through the table to see other champagnes which may suit your style preferences.

His fifth chapter is a list of the 'best champagne producers'. In topographical order, by district and then town/village, this chapter is designed to be used as a guide for anyone wanting to visit producers. (Although, having said that, you'd have to do your own research for contact details and visiting.) This is not an exhaustive or definitive list of best producers. Instead he's selected good to excellent producers who offer 'amazing diversity in philosophy, style and taste'. The producers get a star rating, but the strength of this chapter lies in the fantastic detail. These are wonderful producer profiles (the best of all the champagne books I've reviewed) and offer copious background notes on their champagnes. Chapeau!

Finally, his last two chapters are on 'Enjoying champagne' and 'Enjoying Champagne'. The former comes with advice on avoiding cheap champagne and why, to decoding labels, serving, matching with food (lots of talk of truffles and caviar – not his finest moment) and a brief vintage guide from 1995 to 2016. The latter is for the tourist, with excellent recommendations and reviews of places to stay, eat, drink and buy. I particularly enjoyed his observation on the relations between Reims and Épernay: 'In order to travel from Reims to Épernay – and vice versa – we must cross "la montagne". If you believe the locals, this is almost as big a task as climbing the Alps. As a result ... the inhabitants of Reims and Épernay do this as little as possible'. In passing, he has a real dig at the museum in Épernay, calling it 'an embarrassment' for Champagne! Ouch. It's not a natty little travel guide by any stretch of the imagination, but you could easily use this book at home to plan your trip.

On the other hand, there is an iBook version, and I've been informed that 'the reader can click, scroll, zoom, listen, watch, make contact through various links and so on. There are about 25 digital maps based on the French cadastre ... With these maps one can see the Champagne vineyards through burgundian eyes. All the local lieux-dits (single vineyards) of relevance can be studied.'

The maps mentioned are by Laurent Marty of Mappavini. They are in the hardback book and are excellent, going right down to lieu-dit level. The interactive maps have got to be great fun. Cees Nouwens did a series of gorgeous, evocative sketches – some hauntingly moody – and these add a very special dimension to this most sensory of books. I also have to commend Patricia Riley for her precise and fluid translation, and the superb copy-editing by Kate Wallwork – I found few errors. (But you did fail to spot the untranslated Dutch in the style classification table, Kate...)

I have a couple of minor gripes, the first one being a matter of personal style. I prefer my grape varieties to start with upper-case letters. Peter Liem also erred on this matter (in my opinion). Occasionally the subheadings seemed to lag behind the text – to the point where I wondered whether there had been a printing error. And there was a bit of repetition, but perhaps in a book where the themes of terroir, winemaking, and the move from productivity/brand to quality run right through the book, some repetition is inevitable. But I think it could possibly have been streamlined just a little more.

Gert Crum achieved great balance in this book. He writes with respect and great love for a region and wine which he knows intimately, but he does not write with Dom Pérignon's fabled stars in his eyes. He is openly sceptical and does not deify champagne or the producers, but at the same time he does not dwell on the past or the problems, but focuses with anticipation on the exciting changes happening right now. It offers a less intense (although equally intelligent) and broader view of the changes and future of Champagne than Peter Liem's book, so I would be hard put to say which I thought was better.

But Crum made me chuckle...
