

France, Champagne: Olivier Collin, the Artist of Congy

By [WILLIAM KELLEY](#) Aug 31, 2019

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Five thousand years ago, the Côteaux du Petit Morin witnessed a remarkable efflorescence of Neolithic civilization, nurtured by the unusual abundance of flints found in its chalky soils. Not far from the small village of Congy, archeologists have unearthed the densest concentration of underground burial chambers ever discovered in France. How apposite that—millennia later—the region’s flinty chalk should once again bring Congy to prominence, thanks to the remarkable wines of Olivier Collin. Powerful but incisive and increasingly refined, these are some of the most compelling wines being produced in contemporary Champagne. But although he’s one of the acknowledged stars of the grower movement that has so galvanized this region over the last 15 years—and despite being Champagne’s largest producer of single-vineyard wines—Collin and the vineyards with which he works remain surprisingly poorly understood. Indeed, merchants, retailers and even wine critics still routinely misspell the name of his largest cuvée, the *c* which frequently loses its first ‘i’ to become Les Perrières.

Olivier Collin is frequently portrayed as a Champagne newcomer, yet while this estate’s latest incarnation dates back less than two decades, it has much longer antecedents. The Collins have been winegrowers in Congy for generations. Written records date back to 1812, when Jean-Bapriste Collin, *vigneron*, purchased a parcel of vines in the village, so it’s likely the family have been established here for longer still. By the early 20th century, the Collins had begun bottling their own wines, and George Collin, Olivier’s great-grandfather, won a prestigious prize in the Concours Général Agricole de Paris in 1935. By the 1970s, the Collins were among the founding members of the Club de Viticultures Champenois, today known as the Club Trésors du Champagne or Special Club. Olivier’s father, however, didn’t especially enjoy the precarious existence of a small Champagne producer in a seldom-visited area, so he stopped bottling his wines and leased the family’s vineyards to Pommery. The Collin family’s winemaking patrimony thus fell into abeyance.

In the 1990s, Olivier Collin became a wine lover and began to contemplate taking over the family’s vineyards. But breaking a contract with a large *négociant* isn’t a simple matter. Collin studied for a law degree and also undertook a BTS in viticulture and oenology to prepare himself for the battle to come. And in 2001, he spent two months working for Anselme Selosse in Avize as a *stagiaire*. In due course, Olivier was able to negotiate the release of some 8.7 hectares of his family’s holdings in time for the 2003 vintage; but their crop was promptly devastated by frost. It was only in 2004, therefore, that he began to produce wine of his own.



Olivier Collin (Photo credit: Gretchen Greer)

Collin’s first step in taking back his family vineyards was to purchase a tractor and begin ploughing the soils. Living soils, he believes, are a prerequisite for *terroir* expression, and from the beginning he has aspired to produce *terroir-*

driven wines. Chemical fertilizers and herbicides were accordingly replaced with organic compost and laborious working of the soil; but while he had witnessed biodynamics first-hand chez Selosse, Collin's concerns about the effects of copper accumulation in the soils have precluded his following suit. While he employs sulfur against oidium, he prefers to use a relatively benign and, above all, biodegradable synthetic product to battle mildew rather than employing copper sulfate.

Collin has fermented his wines in used Burgundy barrels from the beginning, but his techniques have evolved. An old Coquard press has been replaced by a new, state-of-the-art version from the same firm. Reserve wines entered the equation in 2009, and today an ever-increasing array of large oak foudres now supplement 225-liter pièces for their storage. And at the same time, Collin began topping up his *vins clairs* during their maturation, eliminating the oxidative, biologically aged qualities that characterized some of his early releases and which suggested analogies between his style and Selosse's. "I came to believe that if a wine is going to age gracefully, it has to start out life young," he explains. Though dosage remains well below three grams per liter, some cuvées today see a touch more than they did in the past, rendering them a little less severe—"less elitist," as Olivier puts it, crediting his wife Sandra's influence in tempering his tendency to be uncompromising. Today, Collin is investing all his resources in building up his stocks of reserve wines and extending the time his cuvées see *sur lattes* before disgorgement. With each new release seemingly more impressive than the last, Champagne Ulysse Collin today ranks as one of the most exciting producers in the entire region.

That these wines—which can stand head to head with the best of the Côte de Blancs and Montagne de Reims—should emerge from the vineyards of the Côteaux du Petit Morin and the Sézannais calls into question many of the preconceived hierarchies that still define how the wines of Champagne are perceived. Like Cédric Bouchard in the Côte des Bar—whose story is also told in this issue—Collin works with vineyards that belong to what might be called "the secret garden of Champagne." For a long time, the négociants of Reims and Epernay were content to purchase grapes in these areas while entirely denying them publicity. Seldom visited by tourists or even the trade, these hidden wine-producing villages languished in obscurity, Congy among them. And certainly, none of the *lieu-dit* names that have graced Collin's labels since 2008 have ever been household names.



Tasting at Ulysse Collin

While Collin's three vineyards planted to Chardonnay—Les Pierrières, Les Roises and Les Enfers—are variously lumped in with the Côte de Blancs or with the Côte de Sézanne, they are in fact better thought of as part of the Côteaux du Petit Morin, a wine-producing area south of the Côtes de Blancs. Located on hillsides that follow the course of the River Morin and are intersected by its tributaries, the vineyards are morcellated, contrasting with the continuous band of vines in the Côte de Blancs. Though in terms of geology, the slopes of the Côteaux du Petit Morin are very similar to the slopes of the Côte de Blancs, the slopes are less extended; from the top of the slope to bottom, the vineyards at Avize stretch around four times further than those at Congy. In the Côteaux du Petit Morin, the soils are rich in black flint—the "pierres" (stones) that give Collin's Les Pierrières its name and a phenomenon that explains the abundant Neolithic activity in this sector. Pinot Meunier is the dominant *cépage*, and none of the Côteaux du Petit Morin were entitled to premier or grand cru status under the late and unlamented *échelle des crus*.

Collin's northernmost *lieu-dit* is **Les Pierrières**, an east-facing site that's six kilometers from Congy and within sight of the Côte de Blancs. The soils here are shallow and the underlying chalk especially rich in black flint. Les Pierrières produces Collin's most chiseled and incisive Blanc de Blancs, a powerful but tight-knit wine with a searingly mineral finish. Its sense of energy is almost electric. By contrast, Les Enfers and Les Roises overlook the village of Congy, and they're separated by nothing more than a vineyard track. **Les Roises** boasts deeper soils (around 1.5 meters) and is south-facing, with more clay in its soils and old-vine massal selection Chardonnay vines that always give low yields—many toward the village are virused, making for especially small, concentrated berries. In Les Enfers, the slope bears toward the east, and the soils are both richer in iron and shallower, less than a meter deep. Les Roises produces Collin's most textural and exotic wine, whereas **Les Enfers** is a little denser and finer boned.



Pupitre at Ulysse Collin

Thirty minutes to the south by car and two hours by tractor is **Les Maillons**, Collin's only parcel in the Sézannais, located near the hamlet of Barbonne-Fayel. This region, with its gentle south- and southeast-facing slopes and deep, clay-rich topsoils, blossomed in the 1960s as farmers planted with a view to producing large quantities of inexpensive grapes. Many Côte de Blancs producers are landholders here, though few care to disclose it. As the vineyards have aged, they've become less productive, naturally limiting yields. The Collin family planted their 2.5-hectare parcel in Les Maillons in 1971 and have worked it ever since, but it didn't belong to them until recently. The previous proprietor was a Parisian pharmacist, and on her decease without heirs, Olivier assumed the vineyard would be sold. Instead, he discovered that she had left it to him in her will, declaring that the ownership of the land should return to those who cultivate it. Les Maillons's easterly exposition is an advantage in a region that tracks on average one degree Celsius warmer than Congy, and it's the source of Collin's exquisite Blanc de Noirs as well as his serious, gastronomic Rosé de Saignée.

Twenty years ago, it would have been hard to imagine that wines produced in such obscure parts of Champagne could enjoy such success. Today, that's changing, but it hasn't been easy. Reviving a forgotten label in an unheard-of village, rehabilitating neglected vineyards and starting out in a winery without any reserve wines and equipped with only the most rudimentary materiel, it is hard to underestimate what Collin has achieved. So, while his is a sensitive, even artistic temperament, it should come as no surprise that there is no greater proselyte for the merits of hard work in all of Champagne than Olivier Collin. Its rewards are writ large in wines that have gained immeasurably in precision, concentration, elegance and longevity since his early releases. The inaugural four vintages of Ulysse Collin were powerful and impactful, already marked by a strong and intensely vinous personality, but Olivier's wines of today are altogether more complete and more harmonious. In short, they have more to say and less to prove. And since Collin clearly has no intention of resting on his laurels, I'm convinced that even greater things are to come.