

2014 Bollinger La Côte aux Enfants and Vieilles Vignes Françaises: Black beauties

Even in a challenging vintage, the house manages to conjure up blanc de noirs magic from very special parcels of vines.



Neil Beckett welcomes the release of 2014 Bollinger La Côte aux Enfants and Vieilles Vignes Françaises.

Swapping children for the devil. Happily, this wasn't a Champenois twist on the Faustian pact but rather the renaming of a very special Bollinger monopole vineyard in its grand cru home village of Aÿ, once known as La Côte aux Enfers (Hell's Hill), due to the steepness of the slope, but more recently given the less diabolical name of La Côte aux Enfants, because children were thought to be the only ones who could easily scamper up it. (For more on the fascinating history of this vineyard, see Essi Avellan MW's Review piece on the red Coteaux Champenois produced here since the 1834

vintage, shortly after Jacques Bollinger completed the purchase of all 50 parcels across the 4ha [10-acre] site; *WFW* 73, pp.88–90).

Champagne will always be largely about the art of *assemblage*, but there are, wonderfully, some villages and single vineyards that deserve to stand alone, due to their distinctive and, even rarer, their sufficiently rounded personality. Complexity is as crucial a consideration as singularity. And as clear a case as any is La Côte aux Enfants. Because of its ability to produce exceptionally ripe Pinot Noir, its southern sector has long been the source of Bollinger's still red wine (the Aÿ Rouge/Coteaux Champenois and now, after a slightly different vinification, the red wine used for Bollinger's Vintage La Grande Année Rosé). But the ability of the cooler northwestern sector to produce a scintillating blanc de noirs Champagne, suggested by the house's increasingly sophisticated understanding of the site, was thrillingly revealed by the inaugural 2012 vintage in 2022 (see Essi Avellan's Preview in *WFW* 78, pp.62–63). Also two years ago, ill health forced the late Gilles Descôtes, Bollinger's *chef de cave* since 2013, to retire, but he was succeeded by his close colleague Denis Bunner, who launched the 2013 Côte aux Enfants last year and the 2014 this.

At a “Harvest Lunch” at Apricity in London on October 7, Bunner explained the challenges of the 2014 (and 2024) growing season, the cool, wet summer being especially tricky for houses that, like Bollinger, avoid herbicides. (It was the first house to be certified HVE in 2012 and VDC in 2014.) But hard work in the vines, better, milder conditions before the harvest, and, Bunner emphasized, the patience to wait a week longer than most others before picking (the Côte aux Enfants on September 16), resulted in a crop of concentrated, healthy ripe fruit, with high levels of acidity. (None was as high again until 2024.) He explained that as for the house’s existing blanc de noirs prestige cuvée, the iconic Vieilles Vignes Françaises—the 2014 vintage of which he was also launching—the “philosophy” for La Côte aux Enfants was to “push maturity to the limit,” the ripeness coming readily from the chalky, shallow, well-draining soils (only 1 inch [30mm] deep), as well as the steepness of the slope (20 degrees).

Tasting

2014 Bollinger La Côte aux Enfants

(100% Pinot Noir; fermented in aged oak barrels; disgorged March 27, 2024; *dosage* 6g/l)

Still palest lemon gold, with a very fine, graceful, persistent mousse. A completely captivating, kaleidoscopic nose, which continued to reveal some new aromatic weave with every turn over a good hour in the glass: very concentrated and ripe, but also detailed and intricate, the fruit initially Golden Delicious apple, quince, greengage, and white peach, but all freshened, stiffened, and surrounded by a chalky, mineral, and marine-saline whiff; then rounded and softened by fresh-baked bread aromas, without being at all doughy or yeasty. Rooted by faint fennel and licorice; wafted by a light smokiness; and finally sweetened by delicate acacia honey and white mushroom. Beautifully balanced and refined, densely but finely spun, elegant and silky; gentle ginger spice; effortlessly expanding without any loss of precision or surface tension, sustained through the fabulous, spiraling finish, where the very subtle phenolic rub is more valedictory wave than bear hug. A very different, but fully worthy sibling to the VVF and, to me, as thrilling a “new” monoparcél blanc de noirs (to say the least) as any since Krug’s 1995 Clos d’Ambonnay. 3,000 bottles. | **97–98**

2014 Bollinger Vieilles Vignes Françaises(100% Pinot Noir; fermented in aged oak barrels; disgorged February 15, 2024; *dosage* 4g/l)