

Anselme Selosse and Champagne's Artisanal Revolution

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Vintage	Wines	RP
NV	Jacques Selosse Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs Substance	100
NV	Jacques Selosse Extra Brut Grand Cru Le Bout du Clos	98+
NV	Jacques Selosse Extra-Brut Grand Cru Les Carelles	97
2009	Jacques Selosse Extra-Brut Premier Cru Millésime	97
NV	Jacques Selosse Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru V. O. (Version Originale)	94+

Anselme Selosse may have officially retired last year, but his influence will continue to shape Champagne for many years to come. “My first harvest,” he recalls, “was the 1974 vintage, and I sold it in November 1978 for the equivalent of 3.70 euros per bottle. It wasn't easy to sell!” Today, by contrast, a thirsty world clamors for Selosse’s bottles, and he’s rightly credited with a leading role in transforming contemporary Champagne. Indeed, Selosse looms so large in the region that he sometimes casts a shadow over other producers: Phrases such as “worked with Selosse” or “inspired by Selosse” are used routinely by the trade, but they hardly do justice to the originality of the diverse diaspora of growers touched by his influence.

In fact, despite all the acclaim, the true nature of Anselme Selosse’s achievements seem to me somewhat misunderstood. Selosse is credited with launching a “grower revolution” in the region, yet there had been grower-bottlers in Champagne long before Selosse. The oldest date back to the 19th century, and many more joined their ranks in the 1930s, when inflation and economic depression meant that bottling and selling wine, rather than grapes, was the only way to eke out a living from Champagne’s tiny smallholdings (which averaged scarcely more than a hectare in size in this period). More recently, in the 1970s—as Selosse was just starting out—some of the region’s finest grower-bottlers banded together to form the *Club de Viticultures Champenois*, today known as the *Club Trésors du Champagne* or Special Club.



The lineup of new releases from Jacques Selosse

Selosse, then, was not the first grower. But he was the first grower in Champagne explicitly to draw inspiration from Burgundy, where he studied at the Lycée Viticole in Beaune between 1969 and 1973. “In Champagne at that time, the idea of quality production in the vineyard simply did not exist,” he explained in a 2017 interview with Robin Lee. “In Burgundy, I witnessed a different relationship between those who produced and those who sold the wine, and it made a big impression. In Champagne it was simply the more you produced the more you got paid. In Burgundy, even in those days the wine was assessed for its quality and valued accordingly.” In Champagne, Selosse also observed, the market placed a premium on vintage, whereas in Burgundy it was the wine’s origin that had the biggest impact on its price. And it is in his career-long emphasis on quality over quantity and site over vintage that Selosse’s time in Burgundy has most consistently manifested itself.

Believing that phytosanitary treatments, fertilizers and productive rootstocks and clones had artificially augmented yields at the expense of concentration and character, Selosse sought modest yields from balanced vines growing in living soils. In the 1930s, yields in Champagne averaged 24 hectoliters per hectare. By the 1950s, that had risen to 33; in the 1960s, to over 50; and by the 1970s and 1980s, to over 60 hectoliters per hectare. Just as importantly, during the same period, the average weight of a grape cluster in Champagne more than doubled. Selosse was the first to reverse this tendency, and he was soon followed by others, such as Ambonnay’s Francis Egly in the 1980s and Vertus’s Pierre Larmandier in the early 1990s. At the time, these were independent initiatives, and these growers weren’t aware of each other’s work: it is only retrospectively that these pioneers have been identified as the initiators of a movement.

At vintage time, Selosse was also an outlier, harvesting later than most other producers in Champagne in pursuit of fully mature fruit that will not require supplemental sugar from chaptalization. And in the cellar, winemaking was Burgundian from the beginning, with fermentation

mainly in 228-liter pièces from Tonnellerie de Mercurey and François Frères, some 20% of which are renewed each year. Selosse is a partisan of indigenous yeasts and isolated his own proprietary selections from his cellar for the second fermentation in bottling—something that's usually achieved with commercial selections. The ensuing wines were always vinous and concentrated, and it was their "Burgundian" style that made the biggest impression on visitors to his cellars in the 1980s.



Anselme Selosse (Photo by Thomas Stephenson, The Rare Wine Company)

Over the years, however, Selosse increasingly came to focus on what he describes as the "one gram of mineral substance in a liter of grape juice, not the 250 grams of organic matter." When we last tasted together, he expounded, "Scientists say that the vines don't take minerals from the soil, but no one has ever been able to explain to me where that one gram of mineral salts comes from." From this perspective, biological aging and controlled oxidation become ways to "burn away" the organic matter, effacing the ephemeral influence of vintage and leaving behind only the terroir-derived mineral residue that interests him; and these techniques drawn not on Burgundy nor even the Jura, but rather an engagement with the wines of Spain—especially the biological maturation of Jerez and the long *élevage* of Rioja—that began when Selosse first visited the Iberian Peninsula in 1972. Precisely because he is interested in the mineral and not the organic, he privileges texture over aroma. "In the old days of the *tastevin*," he said, referring to the small silver saucers used for tasting in the cellar, "texture was all-important. With the advent of the ISO tasting glass"—which amplifies aroma, distracting from texture—"the way we make wine changed." And in any case, Selosse has smoked Lucky Strikes since his youth.

What does this mean at a technical level? Selosse leaves eight to 10 liters headspace in his barrels and tops them up little by little as fermentation subsides. At the end of November or early in December, they're fully topped up and thenceforth left alone. Since his cellar, thanks to fans, remains cooler than the outside environment but warms and cools following its fluctuations, a layer of flor develops in spring as the cellar warms. Thereafter, Selosse and his team smell the barrels: any

that are oxidative are stirred, reintroducing the heavy lees into suspension to return the wine to a more reductive state, and any that are reduced, Selosse agitates with the same *dodine* to expel dissolved carbon dioxide. Throughout their *élevage*, the barrels's bungs are only loosely closed, as Selosse says he wants the wines to breathe. Reserve wines are stored in a so-called perpetual reserve, offering an average of vintage variation, whereas his cuvée Substance is drawn from a true solera established in 1986, intended to efface vintage variation entirely.



The latest disgorgement of Selosse's Substance

Champagnes produced from *vins clairs* such as these display a unique aromatic range and intensely sapid aromas. "I'm interested in making small quantities of very specific wines for certain drinkers and certain occasions," Selosse told me in Avize, adding that while he admires the prosperity and plenty that Atlantic capitalism has created, he regrets its tendency to globalize away strong regional identities and tastes. "I have no interest in making Champagne that appeals to everyone," he readily admits, and his intensely characterful wines do indeed divide opinion. Foremost among Selosse's critics is wine writer Tom Stevenson, who questions whether Selosse's "oxidative" approach is even "a legitimate style." But to me, such critiques caricature to the point of parody wines defined more by a complex patina derived from barrel fermentation, unusually long *sur lie* maturation in wood, biological aging, Maillard reactions and ripe fruit. In some cuvées and disgorgements, oxidative nuances sometimes make an appearance in this complex *mélange*, but it isn't possible to say where one influence ends and another begins.

Of course, even Stevenson acknowledges Selosse's pervasive influence in Champagne. Yet that influence is arguably inseparable from his stylistic choices in the vineyards and the cellar; for it is Selosse's very willingness to break with the region's tired conventions and follow his own ideas from which other producers have drawn liberating inspiration. As Adrien Dhondt, a young grower in the Côte des Blancs explains, "Anselme has influenced me a lot, because he succeeded in realizing his own conception of wine: whether one likes or dislikes them, his wines are unique in the world. He showed me the path I was looking for." And it's for precisely this reason that though Selosse has inspired many other growers, he has no slavish imitators. Many of the luminaries of today's artisanal Champagne have spent time with Anselme in Avize, but they have all elaborated distinctive visions and styles of their own. In a region that still produces far too many over-cropped, underripe, over-sugared wines that are as technically accomplished as they are devoid of character, Selosse's style was not merely legitimate but rather entirely necessary; and we are all the richer for what Andrew Jefford—one of the first wine writers to sing Selosse's praises—calls his "dissident temperament."

I suspect it's this independence of spirit that makes Selosse's wines such a favorite with many other winemakers. As Burgundy's Jean-Marie Guffens puts it, "for me, his Champagnes are winemakers' wines. They're very sculpted by the artist. He has found ways to bring more taste to Champagne, and, above all, he did it his own way." Jean-Marc Roulot is similarly complimentary, saying that "Selosse is anxious, but it's expressed positively—it means he's always thinking about every detail, even the day-to-day things others might take for granted. He's a thoughtful and complex personality, and I think that's faithfully captured in his thought-provoking, complex wines." Such testimonials eloquently express why Selosse occupies such an important place in any pantheon of French winemakers. He may have retired last year, but his influence will be enduring.

A note on the tasting: Selosse may have retired, but thousands of bottles he crafted during his career's 45 vintages await disgorgement in his cellars in Avize. The accompanying tasting notes survey his latest releases, disgorged in 2019—one of the finest sets of wines I have ever tasted from Selosse.



