

ONE BOTTLE:

The Pierre Gimmonnet & Fils Champagne Cuis Blanc de Blancs

by JOSHUA BAER

Are you paradox-intolerant? If you think you are, then you probably aren't, but if you think you aren't, then you probably are. Many people make the mistake of thinking that a paradox is like a riddle. Once you know the answer, the question makes sense. In fact, a paradox is the opposite of a riddle. Even *after* you know the answer, neither the question nor the answer makes sense.

Here is a fast paradox: *Answer the following question truthfully (yes or no): Will the next word you say be "no"?*

Here is a slow paradox: *Years ago, in the Land of Egypt, there was a crocodile who lived on the banks of the Nile. One day, the crocodile saw a mother and her child walking along the banks. In an instant, the crocodile snatched the child from his mother. "Please give him back," said the mother. "He's my only son." The crocodile winked at the mother. "If you guess correctly what I will do with your son," he said, "I will give him back. But if you guess incorrectly, I will eat him." What did the mother say?*

The word "paradox" comes from the Latin *paradoxum*, "a statement that is absurd but true," which comes from the Greek *paradoxos*, "contrary to expectations." The roots of the word are the Greek *para*, "contrary to," and *doxa* "opinion." However, *para* can also be translated as "from," "of," "at," "besides," or "near." No wonder *para* ended up as the key ingredient in the word "parable."

In the wine world, paradoxes abound. One of the great paradoxes of wine is expressed by the Winemaker's Cliché: "We make our wines in the vineyard." What the cliché means in layman's terms is, "We grow the best grapes we can grow, then we let the wine make itself." The paradox lies in the netherworld between doing and being: How do you make something better by leaving it alone?

A related question is posed by the Paradox of the Kir Royale. The French serve an aperitif called a Kir, which is a glass of white wine (traditionally, an Aligote; these days, more often than not, a Chablis) poured over a teaspoon of Crème de Cassis, the liqueur made from blackcurrants. The French being French, they cannot leave well enough alone, so they also serve an aperitif called a Kir Royale, which is a glass of Champagne poured over a teaspoon of Crème de Cassis. A twist of lemon is added at the last moment.

Kirs Royaux are addictive. As your addiction grows, you begin to experiment, as addicts often do, with your ingredients. The best Crème de Cassis I have tasted is the Edmond Briottet, from Dijon, which is made with blackcurrants from Burgundy. The best lemon twist I have used in a Kir Royale is a hair-thin peel from the skin of a Meyer lemon. And the best Champagne? Now we arrive at the heart of the Paradox of the Kir Royale. If you want to make a great Kir Royale, you use the best Champagne you can afford, right?

Well, actually, no.

Let's assume that you are wealthy and that you already own cases of vintage Salon, Krug, or Cristal. The problem with using a world-class Champagne to make a Kir Royale is that you corrupt the purity of your key ingredient. If you pour

the 1990 Cristal over a tablespoon of Crème de Cassis, and then add a twist of lemon, you separate yourself from the chance to taste the 1990 Cristal as it was intended to be tasted. In other words, you try (and fail) to improve a Champagne that cannot be improved.

Fortunately, there is a common sense solution to the Paradox of the Kir Royale. The best Kir Royale is not made with the best Champagne. It is made with a Champagne that is, paradoxically, good enough not to be great.

Which brings us to the Pierre Gimmonnet Champagne Cuis Blanc de Blancs.

Cuis is a village in the Champagne-Ardenne region of France, ninety minutes northeast of Paris and fifteen minutes south of the city of Reims. The Champagne-Ardenne's chalky soil is the same vein of calcium carbonate that appears 200 miles northwest of Champagne, in England's Cliffs of Dover. In Champagne, the chalky soil is a double attribute: The vines that grow in Champagne's chalk struggle just enough to produce grapes of character, and the underground cellars burrowed into the chalk provide the balance of humidity, stability, and temperature that is ideal for aging the Champagnes made from those grapes.

In the glass, the Pierre Gimmonnet Champagne Blanc de Blancs is the color of frost with a hint of celadon worked into the crystal-clear background of that frost. On the palate, the flavors are direct but not obvious. Each sip is a journey through the Land of Incomplete Dreams. The finish is nervous, but nervous in a good way, like the moment of hesitation before a first kiss.

In Santa Fe, you can buy the Pierre Gimmonnet Champagne Cuis Blanc de Blancs at Liquor Barn for \$47, at Whole Foods for \$50, and at Kaune's for \$58. You can buy the Edmond Briottet Crème de Cassis at the world's greatest neighborhood liquor store, Cliff's Liquors on Old Pecos Trail, for \$30 a bottle.

Yogi Berra, the Hall of Fame Yankees catcher, is the modern master of the paradox. Berra—who grew up as Lawrence Peter Berra, in St. Louis, and was nick-named "Yogi" because of his resemblance to a Hindu holy man—is widely appreciated for his Paradox of Correspondence: "Never answer an anonymous letter," for his Paradox of Direction: "When you come to a fork in the road, take it," and for his Paradox of Metaphysics: "It's like *deja vu* all over again." As brilliant as those paradoxes are, they pale in comparison to Yogi's remark about Ruggieri's Restaurant in St. Louis: "It's so crowded, nobody goes there anymore."

What would Yogi have said to the crocodile? I don't know, but I do know this: The mother said, "After you give him back to me, my son will grow up and save the world."

Absurd, yes, but also true. ♡

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