



THIBAUT - JANISSON



VIRGINIA

# Champagne *in Translation*

Grace Reynolds

Photos by Sarah Cramer Shields

CLAUDE THIBAUT MAKES SPARKLING WINE IN VIRGINIA USING WHAT HE LEARNED GROWING UP IN CHAMPAGNE AND WORKING HIS WAY UP IN CALIFORNIA.

On a journey spanning more than 25 years, Claude Thibaut has carried his sparkling-wine expertise from France to Virginia, with stops in Australia and California on the way. As a consultant, he has brought sparkling wine to a list of wineries that reads more like a who's who of American wine, including Jordan (the bottle with the eye-catching "J" painted on it), Iron Horse, and Kendall-Jackson.

We're lucky enough to now have him here in Afton, Virginia, where he leases space from Veritas Winery and has created his own label with an old friend.

## From Champagne to Charlottesville

Thibaut-Janisson was born from a long friendship that began in a Grand Cru village in the Champagne region of France. Thibaut and his friend Manuel Janisson, both from champagne-producing families in the town, started in the family businesses at a young age. When Thibaut came to work in California in 1983, he had already spent a few years working in Australia, and Janisson was looking for some experience working in California. Thibaut arranged for Janisson to come work with him, and the two young men began talking of one day producing a sparkling wine together. About 25 years later, they agreed that Virginia could be the place to do it.

Thibaut came to Charlottesville with his wife in 2003 to consult at Kluge Estate Winery, and since then he has provided his services for numerous Virginia wineries, including Veritas. In 2005, after seeing the potential for Virginia sparkling wine, Thibaut and Janisson began their joint venture, and in 2007 they had the first release of their nonvintage blanc de chardonnay. Janisson continues his successful work in his family's business (Janisson et Fils), and he provides consultation and financing for equipment and operations. Meanwhile, Thibaut controls the entire winemaking process.

## Methode Thibaut

For his blanc de chardonnay, Thibaut sources all of the grapes, exclusively chardonnay, from the Monticello AVA (American Viticultural Area). Roughly half of these grapes come from a nearby vineyard, Ivy Creek Farm, which has some of the oldest chardonnay vines around—dating back to 1982. The fruit from these old vines adds to Thibaut's success: The older the vine, the less fruit it produces, but in exchange, the quality is superior. Thibaut visits and chooses a harvest date for his fruit based on its sugar and acid levels. This is always early in the season, because chardonnay destined for sparkling wine must be picked when acidity is high. Chardonnay grapes grown in Virginia have a lower acidity to start with than their French cousins, so he picks all of his fruit within a week's time in order to hit that prime acidity level.





*Bottles of Thibaut's blanc de chardonnay rest in gyropalettes (left) for about a week to bring the lees, or sediment, into the bottlenecks before they are disgorged. This equipment (center) comprises Thibaut's disgorging line. Thibaut makes his wine at Veritas Winery in Afton, Virginia, west of Charlottesville.*

He uses the “methode champenoise,” the traditional method of making champagne in which the wine goes through a secondary fermentation in the bottle and ages on the lees for about two years before being riddled, disgorged, and then finally readied for sale. In Champagne, there are a multitude of rigid rules to comply with in order to make wine that carries the name of the famous region. That is not the case here. “I know which steps of the method I have to respect,” Thibaut says. “I use the same method I would use in Champagne, but here the change is in the fruit. I want people, when they taste the sparkling wine, to be able to tell it has the same finesse [as one made in Champagne].”

One thousand cases were made of the first-released Thibaut-Janisson Blanc de Chardonnay Brut, and they made their way mostly to small retailers and restaurants. This was facilitated in

*“Everybody said, ‘There’s no way Sonoma County can compete with Napa.’ I can see that same kind of evolution happening here.”*

— Claude Thibaut

part by Thibaut’s wife, Pamela Margaux, head of Margaux and Company—a wine importer and distributor carrying Thibaut-Janisson, Janisson et Fils, and other fine imported and domestic labels. The fine, crisp finesse of this wine is immediately evident. Whether it will stand the test of time, a trait that its Old World inspiration is renowned for, remains to be seen. “The quality of a French champagne is the aging potential. They can age for years and years,” says Thibaut. “The question mark here is, are the wines going to age?”

While American wine drinkers have grown in number and

sophistication during Thibaut’s nearly three decades in the business here, the wine cultures of America and his native France are still worlds apart, and this is especially evident with sparkling wine. “Sparkling wine here—it’s not like France. Here they still think of drinking it as a celebration, or that men don’t look good drinking it, or that you can’t drink it by yourself,” remarks Thibaut. Part of this is due to the marketing of champagne, by the famed eponymous region itself, as a marker of luxury or prestige. Thibaut aims to work around this image. “When you tell people that you can do a lot of food pairings with sparkling wine,” Thibaut says, “well, then you have a lot of educating to do.”

## Processes & Predictions

Thibaut works with many Virginia wineries in their sparkling-wine production, and operates his own disgorging line. The line helps automate the disgorgement process, a procedure unique to sparkling wine. After the wine has aged on the lees in the bottle for at least two years, the bottles are put into a gyropalette, a machine that automates the riddling process. Riddling—slowly turning the bottles to force the lees into the neck of the bottles—was traditionally and painstakingly done by hand. After about a week in the gyropalettes, the lees must be extracted (disgorged) from the bottles. This is done by quickly freezing the lees in the neck of the bottle, popping the cap off, extracting the lees, and refilling the bottle with a precisely mixed recipe of sugar, wine, and often “secret” ingredients (this stage is called dosage). The bottles are then corked and the familiar wire cage is put on to contain the bubbly.

Thibaut gets to see a lot of the behind-the-scenes action in the Virginia wine business, and he’s positively excited about it. “It reminds me of Sonoma County in 1980—it was all farms



**Thibaut-Janisson**  
 (434) 996-3307  
 www.tjwinery.com



then. Everybody said, ‘There’s no way Sonoma County can compete with Napa.’ I can see that same kind of evolution happening here.” He also sees more and more people asking for local wines, and notes that this is important in pushing Virginia wine to the forefront. “There is a demand from the consumer that can kind of force the sommelier to bring in more.”

Plans are in place for another product, “Virginia Fizz,” perhaps in spring. This sparkling wine will have more modern packaging than the blanc de chardonnay, which has a very elegant bottle and a more classy, traditional label, and it will be marketed toward a younger, urban crowd, with a more fruity character and a little less time on the lees. Thibaut is working on this project with some D.C. mixologists to develop the perfect sparkling wine to be used as a base for cocktails. Between the two wines, he hopes to be producing 2,000 cases in three years and then go up to 4,000 to 5,000 cases in five years or so.

With sparkling wine, Thibaut has a niche that allows him to focus in on what he does and likes best. He notes that other wineries with a wide variety of grapes and wines “are still researching and experimenting. I don’t really experiment because I know what I already do best.”

*Grace Reynolds is a Piedmont, Virginia, native who has worked in the U.S. and international wine business for over a decade. She’s a firm believer that sparkling wine is an acceptable and often preferable complement to any meal.*

Local Ingredients. **Transformed.**



**Honeycrisp Apple**  
 Toigo Orchards  
 Shippensburg, PA



**Hand-Dipped Candy Apple Bites**  
 Occasions Caterers  
 Washington, DC

occasionscaterers.com  
 202.546.7400