



THE
WORLD'S
MOST ADMIRED
CHAMPAGNE
BRANDS
2018

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MOËT & CHANDON

CHAMPAGNE





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August 25 was the turning point of the 2017 vintage, according to Lanson's winemaker Hervé Dantan. Widespread development of botrytis threatened to ruin the harvest.

"Many faced the difficult decision between picking clean, but possibly slightly under-ripe, fruit or waiting for phenolic maturity, but running an increasing risk of botrytis spreading," according to Giles Fallowfield.

The harvest was conducted at a frenetic pace and was completed in about 10 days rather than the three weeks it took in 2016. For Giles's full conclusions, turn to his harvest report on page 36.

As to this year's survey, the 'great and the good' have voted and Louis Roederer has stepped up to take on the mantle of The World's Most Admired Champagne Brand. Richly deserved – the champagne has never been outside of the top five since the surveys started.

For those who do not know *Drinks International's* Most Admired surveys, please turn to page 6 to find out how we came up with the list. At this point it is important to stress that the survey is purely an accumulation of opinions and perceptions – but from experts and specialists in the drinks sector who have an intimate knowledge of champagne.

Self-styled Champagne Guru Giles Fallowfield has once again done a sterling job based on his in-depth knowledge of Champagne – both the region and the wine.

I hope sincerely that you broadly agree with our findings but I also hope that some of the climbers and absentees may surprise you and possibly challenge some of your perceptions. Times change and we all, every now and again, have to review what we think we know.

CHRISTIAN DAVIS
MANAGING EDITOR

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Champagne Guru & Main Contributor
GILES FALLOWFIELD

Managing Editor
CHRISTIAN DAVIS
+44 (0)1293 590047
christian.davis@drinksint.com

Production Editor
JAQ BAYLES
jaq.bayles@drinksint.com

Editorial Administrator
ANGEL BROWN
+44 (0) 1293 590048
angel.brown@drinksint.com

Group Art editor
CHRISTINE FREEMAN
christine.freeman@agilemedia.co.uk

Designer
JAMES DOWN
james.down@agilemedia.co.uk

Commercial Director
ROB CULLEN
+44 (0)1293 590043
rob.cullen@drinksint.com

Publisher
JUSTIN SMITH
+44 (0)1293 590041
justin.smith@drinksint.com

Managing Director
RUSSELL DODD
+44 (0)1293 590052
russell.dodd@drinksint.com

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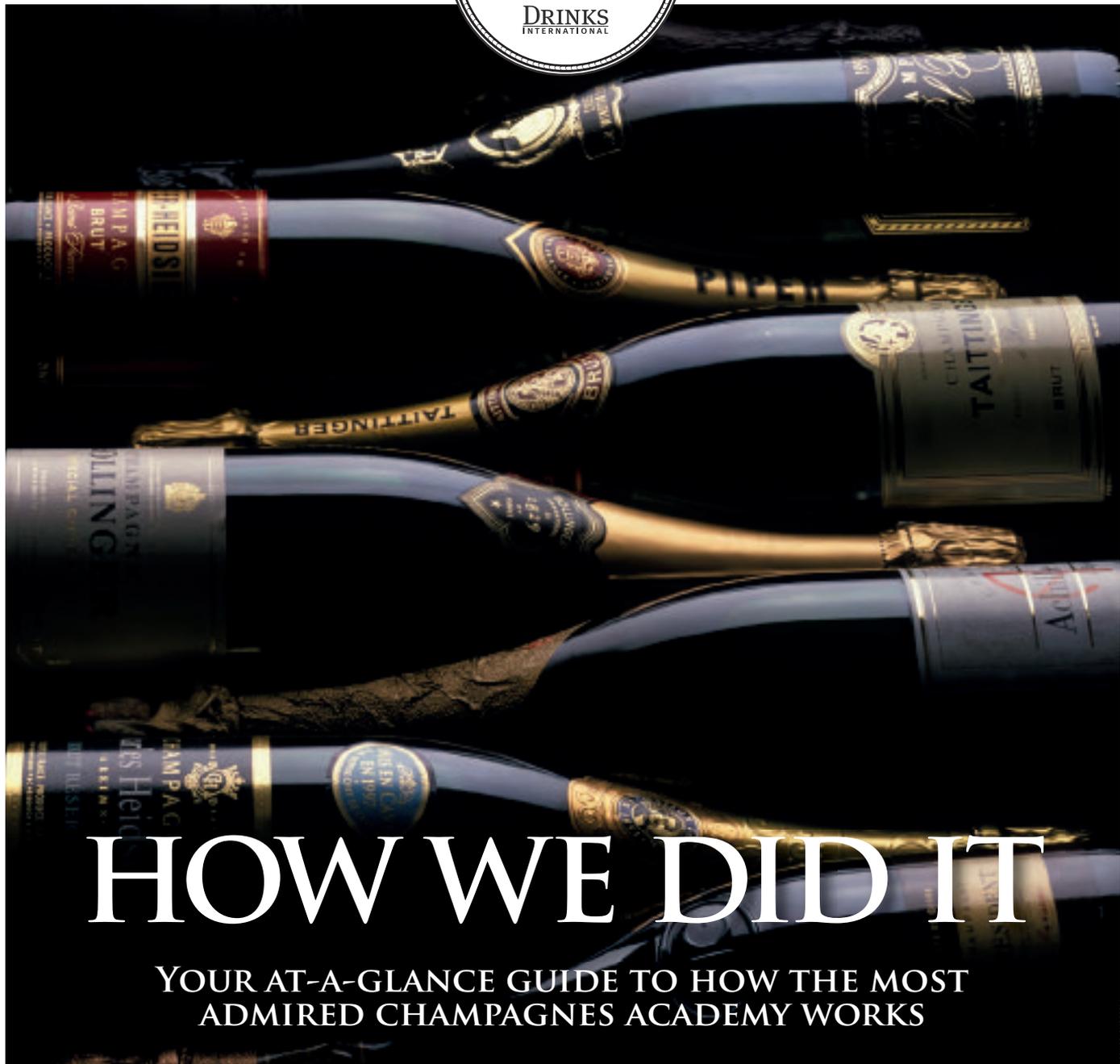
Drinks International
Longley House,
International Drive,
Southgate Avenue,
Crawley, West Sussex
RH10 6AQ United Kingdom
TEL:+44 (0)1293 590040
FAX:+44 (0) 1293 474010
WWW.drinksint.com





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HOW WE DID IT

YOUR AT-A-GLANCE GUIDE TO HOW THE MOST ADMIRED CHAMPAGNES ACADEMY WORKS

Our formidable Academy has chosen Roederer as the World's Most Admired Champagne Brand, replacing Bollinger. Pol Roger, famously Winston Churchill's favourite tippie, has climbed up from fourth place to take the runner-up slot, while last year's winner has slipped to sixth place in 2018.

The Academy voting process was unchanged for the poll's fifth year and, as ever, we assembled a panel of judges drawn from a wide range of

leading retailers, wine writers, MWs and marketing experts and asked them to name their top five brands.

When choosing their list, we asked Academy members to consider the following:

- The quality and consistency of the brand, paying particular attention to its main, non-vintage line
- Whether this quality and consistency has been maintained or improved in the past year
- The quality of brand marketing and packaging



IT'S NOW PARTY TIME FOR WINNER ROEDERER CHAMPAGNE

- The brand's value at its price level
- The overall image of the brand

The results from the Academy members has revealed a list of

30 brands which unmasks the movement of trends among the biggest names in the category.

Over the following pages champagne expert Giles Fallowfield examines the results to give his verdict on the rankings.

Champagne Lanson is one of the biggest brands to exit the 2018 list. Coming in at 20 last year, the brand known best for its Wimbledon sponsorship, has fallen off the list completely.

It's now party time for Roederer and it won't have to look far for a champagne worthy of celebration.



KRUG

CHAMPAGNE

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for the facts

1 LOUIS ROEDERER

LOUIS-ROEDERER.COM

Louis Roederer has never finished outside the top five in the four previous years we have run the World's Most Admired Champagne Brands supplement. And this is the year it's finally made the top slot, which has been hogged exclusively by Bollinger and Krug for the past three years.

What these three brands have in common is consistency. They don't make bad wines and every year efforts are being made to improve quality, even when they appear to already be at the peak of their game. That's what it takes to build a great champagne brand – consistent quality over many years. This is what we ask our distinguished voting academy to take notice of first and foremost, consistency, plus evidence, most likely to be found inside the bottle, that the producer is striving to improve.

In the case of Roederer, we know that the foundation for that quality is the Rouzaud family's 240ha vineyard estate, large enough to provide around two-thirds of the grapes it needs, and mainly comprised of Premier and Grand Cru vineyards.

BRUT PREMIER BLEND

So what helped Roederer clear the final hurdle to the number one spot? From my perspective, it's undoubtedly partly down to the quality of the Brut Premier blend. I believe head winemaker Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon – who has worked at the house since August 1989, amid the three great vintages of '88-'90 and is widely regarded as one of the leading winemakers in the whole appellation – has taken it to another level over the past few years.



I note, for example, the 2012-based blend of Brut Premier that was in the market in late 2016/early 2017 had around 35% reserve wine in it from seven different vintages, more Pinot Noir than usual (at around 46%) less Chardonnay and Meunier and didn't go through malolactic. While the trademark

grapefruit acidity keeps this sparkingly fresh, there's now more depth, texture and mid-palate complexity, especially when in magnum, bringing something extra to the party.

This is not just the result of one major change in policy, but rather lots of tiny ones that Lécaillon and his team



EVERY YEAR
EFFORTS ARE
BEING MADE
TO IMPROVE
QUALITY

have made over the past few years. Being the modest man he is, he'd give the team much of the credit for this evolution in the Roederer winemaking. Collectively they give great attention to the tiny details, as we've reported in this supplement before. For example, the work they have done on following the evolution of the second fermentation in bottle, which has in part led to the decision to give different formats of the Premier Brut, differing pressures by varying the amount of sugar in the prise de mousse.

While winemaking at Roederer is constantly evolving, it's only doing that in line with the changing character of the juice being obtained from the company's vineyards, which were for the first time 100% organically farmed in 2017. The area it is farming biodynamically continues to grow with the 'crystal estate' on track to be 100% farmed this way by 2020, says Lécaillon. "Farming in this way is generating more freshness, more chalkiness, more intensity, more complexity. It has forced us to think differently at blending. The focus is now on texture and soil site expression rather than on grape variety percentages."

So the Roederer style continues to evolve dynamically, which seems likely to keep it in the top-rated brands of our survey for years to come.

THE ROEDERER ESTATE VINEYARD

This covers a total area of 240ha, enough to produce around 2.4m bottles of champagne. It is divided into 410 parcels, or 'lieux-dits'. Some 130 are in Grand Cru villages and a further 73ha have Premier Cru status. All the Roederer vintage wines – that's Cristal Blanc and Rosé, the regular vintage, Blanc de Blancs vintage and Rosé vintage, plus Brut Nature vintage – are 100% produced from this estate.

The wine that is bought in from growers under contract is all fermented in a different part of the winery in Reims, across the road from where the estate wine is kept.

The largest part of the Roederer estate is in the Côte des Blancs where the house owns 126 parcels covering an area of 84ha. This is in villages including: Avize, Cramant, Oger, Mesnil-sur-Oger, Chouilly and Vertus. In the Montagne de Reims Roederer owns 112 parcels covering 69ha in the villages of Verzenay, Verzy, Beaumont-sur-Vesles, Ambonnay, Bouzy, Louvois, Villers-Allerand, Écuéil & Sacy. The Roederer vineyard holdings in the Vallée de la Marne total 172 parcels covering 68ha in the villages of Aÿ, Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, Dizey, Champillon, Hautvillers, Cumières, Damery, Mutigny and Epernay.





2 POL ROGER

POLROGER.CO.UK

Sandwiched between Bollinger and Roederer last year in third spot, this time round Pol Roger makes it to number two, splitting winner Louis Roederer from third-placed Charles Heidsieck. This is now the third year in a row that Pol has achieved a top-four finish – more evidence, if it was needed, that Pol is a great favourite among the professionals in the drinks trade and it's the brand's best result in the five years of the World's Most Admired Champagne Brands.

This hasn't happened by chance. A great deal of work has gone on behind the scenes to take Winston Churchill's favourite champagne to another level of consistent quality. Chief executive Laurent d'Harcourt, who joined Pol from Bruno Paillard's operation, started working with the larger-than-life Patrick Noyelle on the export side of the operation in January 2006. So he's been in the business a dozen years, quietly and unassumingly at the helm since the ebullient Noyelle retired in 2013.

He has continued to be a discreet figure in the background, getting on with job of ensuring everything runs smoothly and efficiently. The renovation and enlargement of the winemaking facilities was completed at the beginning of this decade. It gave head winemaker Dominique Petit, poached from Krug back in the late '90s where he clocked up more than two decades, all the modern winemaking tools to work with from the 2012 harvest. With another fine vintage due to follow in 2013, it will be interesting to see how



IMPRESSIVE OFFERINGS HAVE BEEN MADE NEARLY EVERY EVEN YEAR

these wines perform when they are released, compared with the highlights of the previous decade, where impressive offerings have been made nearly every even year (2000-2008) and some critics say Pol 2008 is the best vintage it has ever made.

Crucially, in today's competitive market for grapes, where increasingly high prices have to be paid to secure the best supplies, Pol Roger owns 91ha of vineyards on prime sites.

These are in the Côte des Blancs, Montagne de Reims and the Vallée de la Marne, enough to supply slightly more than half its needs with production at around 1.8m bottles.

Given the importance of the Pol vintage offering, it makes a disproportionately large

volume of vintage champagne compared to champagne's norm, which is less than 10% of any house's production. This is sensibly used to preserve Pol's reputation as a producer of age-worthy, quite muscular champagnes that often show a lovely silky richness.

In reality these are the wines on which the house's reputation for quality and its hard-to-match image are built, rather than the Brut Réserve. The longer ageing that non-vintage cuvée gets, along with the increasing portion of reserve wines used plus the three-way grape blend, provides the classic example of the so-called *goût-anglais* and the secondary flavours longer ageing tends to impart.

While the brut vintage style is typically a 60/40 Pinot Noir/Chardonnay blend, it's curious to think that Winston's Churchill's penchant for Pinot Noir-dominated champagne was an influence in the blend effectively created in his honour with the 1975 harvest, which has nearer 80% Pinot Noir set against 20% or so Chardonnay.

There was, of course, another prestige offering from Pol at

that time called Pol Roger PR Réserve Speciale, which was a 50/50 Chardonnay and Pinot Noir blend, also entirely sourced from Grand Cru vineyards.

They were both produced until the end of the '80s and, if it hadn't been for the power of the Churchill connection, this might still be the style of Pol Roger's prestige line today.

As we have seen in a number of recent tastings run by The Finest Bubble in London, at which Pol Roger vintage and Winston Churchill have been shown together blind, many people take the view that the higher proportion of Chardonnay in the straight vintage gives a better balance and often more complexity, especially in magnum, a format to which Pol seems ideally suited.

My introduction to vintage Pol Roger was with the Blanc de Chardonnay vintage, often the unsung star of the range. It comes exclusively from five Grands Crus – Oiry, Chouilly, Cramant, Avize and Oger – and provides further strong evidence that Pol Roger's Chardonnay vineyards are something special.

A blind tasting of Pol Roger Sir Winston Churchill, putting a jeroboam of 1988 along with magnums and bottles of '96 (bottle only), '98 (magnum only), '99, 2000, '02 (bottle only) and '04 showed little pattern in either the speed of development or any obvious difference between bottles or magnums of the same wine. Although it did show up 2002 (in bottle), 1998 in magnum and, perhaps surprisingly, magnums of the 2000 vintage, as being the most impressive wines on the night.

Can Pol Roger make it to the top spot next year in the Most Admired Champagne Brands? We'll have to wait and see. 

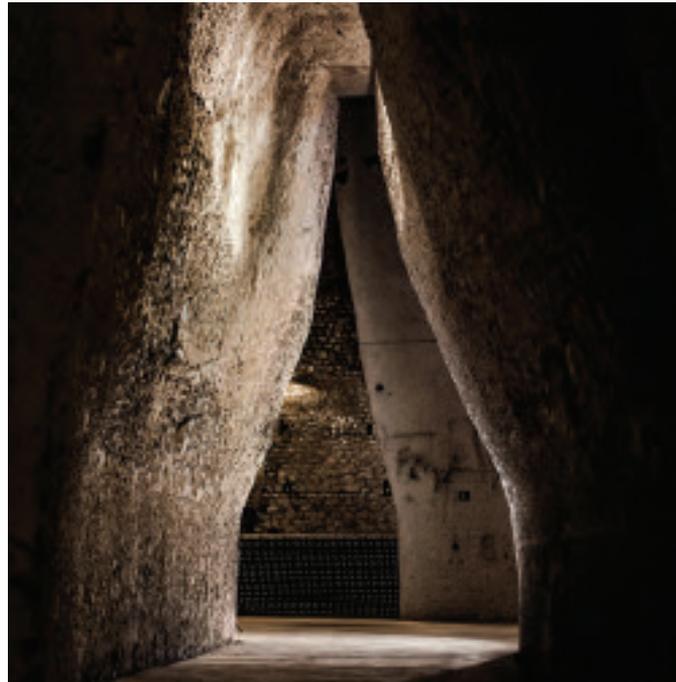
3 CHARLES HEIDSIECK

CHARLESHEIDSIECK.COM

The biggest mover in the upper echelons of our Most Admired Champagne Brands report is Charles Heidsieck. It's been placed sixth and seventh in the past two years and in 2015 it was only 14th. This past performance doesn't, however, represent a fair assessment of the wine. It has been consistently one of the finest non-vintage blends since Daniel Thibault was given the freedom to make it so in 1985, when then owner Rémy Cointreau bought Charles and Piper Heidsieck.

Although Thibault had made earlier versions based on the 1986, '87 and '89 harvests, the Brut Réserve was commercially launched in 1997 as Brut Réserve Mise en Caves 1992, with 60% of the wine from the 1991 vintage plus 40% reserve wines. This was a bold new step for any significant producer, giving the base year for its non-vintage cuvée. At this time it was pretty well unheard of for anyone to be using such a large amount of reserve wine in a mainstream non-vintage brut. Though today many producers have as much as a third of reserve wine in their non-vintage blends, in most cases it won't be a stock that goes back over many past vintages.

As Nick Faith has observed in his writing on the subject, there was a price to pay for this extravagance as it involved a large drop in the volume of non-vintage brut champagne Charles Heidsieck was producing. This, Faith says, was the decision of "the far-sighted André Hériard-Dubreuil, of Rémy Cointreau" who, in an effort to transform the quality of the wine, "allowed sales to



DEMAND FOR ALL CHARLES HEIDSIECK WINES HAS REGENERATED

fall by millions of bottles so that Thibault could build up some reserve stocks".

Fast-forward to 2018 and the house's current executive director, Stephen Leroux, is telling everyone that 30 years ago, before the decision to change the style was made, Charles Heidsieck was a larger brand than Veuve Clicquot, selling 4.5m bottles. But under Rémy Cointreau's ownership this dwindled to a few hundred thousand bottles as the company lost interest in drinks outside its core spirits business.

There was, of course, also the

small distraction of owning Krug. That, though, was sold off to LVMH in January 1999, less than two years after Charles Mise en Cave was launched, to help stave off a financial crisis at Rémy.

The new era for Charles Heidsieck and sister brand Piper began in 2011 when both were bought by Entreprise Patrimoniale d'Investissements, run by Christopher Descours.

The first issue was to sort out the brand's distribution, an easier job than with Piper as the volume had dwindled to around 250,000 bottles.

While the image of the brand had weakened over the years under Rémy Cointreau, which failed to communicate what Mise en Cave was all about, the wines remained top class across the board and continued to win countless awards.

PR activity and tastings of great older vintage wines, many in magnum and jeroboam, have helped strike a much more upbeat note as Charles

re-establishes itself among the most distinguished brands. The availability over a period of nearly a decade of the top-class Blanc des Millénaires 1995 – which Daniel Thibault took the decision of making in far larger volumes than the then brand owners required – has not been a hindrance to the cause.

When Leroux was in London in mid-January to launch the next 2004 vintage of Blanc des Millénaires, we tasted through the current range, starting not with the white but the Rosé Brut Réserve.

This has recently moved from a base of 2008 to a base of 2012, quite a jump. Partly as a result it seems a much fresher style. This is the direction new winemaker Cyril Brun, the red wine specialist in his previous position at Veuve Clicquot, had been talking about taking this cuvée. This predates his arrival at Charles, however, and is more about the more youthful, though similarly high quality, base year.

Until very recently the available blend of Charles Brut Réserve was based on the 2008 harvest. Now it has moved, but only to 2010.

Faithful to the original Thibault model, it still has 40% reserve wines in it and shines in a most appealing way, so you know that it's only going to get better with time.

Blanc des Millénaires 2004 may not be around for quite as long as its predecessor, now that demand for and interest in all Charles Heidsieck wines has regenerated, but it's likely to give similar pleasure.

Asked how many bottles are now selling, Leroux says it's under 1m.

"The strategy is not to create a big volume brand, but be a meaningful player in the high-end sector."





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POL ROGER

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BILLECART-SALMON

CHAMPAGNE-BILLECART.FR

Billecart-Salmon is one of the few significant family-owned champagne houses remaining. This year it has a 200th anniversary to celebrate,

along with its highest-ever ranking in the Most Admired Champagne Brands survey, up one place on last year.

Antoine Roland-Billecart, runs the company with his brother François,

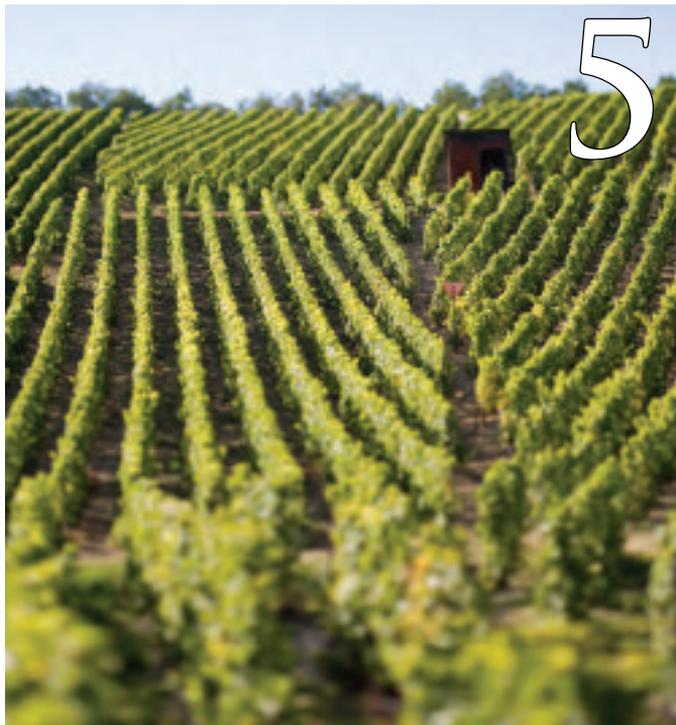
representing the sixth generation of the family at the helm. He has set out the company's strategy for the next century, detailing how it has been investing in the future, both in the winery and by making small purchases of top quality vineyards.

"The goal is to have more Grand Cru vineyard, especially in Ambonnay, Verzy and Verzenay, which are all important Pinot Noir crus for the house, plus Chardonnay from Le Mesnil-sur-Oger and Avize."

In terms of production, he says, the family is happy to stay at the same level of around 2.5m bottles, but wants to upgrade the quality on the grape supply and the profile of the business. In the winery it is adding a further 25 80hl foudres of French (Seguin-Moreau and François Frères) and Stockinger Transylvanian oak for fermentation, which will all be installed in time for the 2018 harvest.

Antoine says the style of the Billecart wines was created by his father, Jean, who started working in the winery in 1947 and celebrated his 94th birthday last October. He was looking above all for freshness and elegance. "He was a pioneer in the cold settling of the must prior to the first fermentation and was one of the first to do this back in 1952." Jean still participates in the pre-tasting and blending of the wines. As Antoine puts it: "He has 70 harvests' experience to share."

It's this continuity, married to embracing the best bits of modern technology, that sets Billecart-Salmon apart from the pack.



KRUG

KRUG.COM

Krug and Roederer are the only two brands which have stayed in the top five for the half decade we've run the Most Admired Champagne Brands supplement. Krug's careful sourcing, long ageing, complex assembly and specific production method, with fermentation taking place in small oak barrels, make for a particular and distinctive flavour profile.

Add in a direct family connection that goes back to the origins of the house – it's no accident that four of our top-five brands have an active family involvement in their operations – and you have a recipe for ongoing success.

The idea that all future releases of the flagship Grande Cuvée will have an edition number only really took hold last year. This development links all the way back to Joseph Krug in the 1840s and recognises the fact that collectors like to taste and compare different blends of Grande Cuvée.

Surely the positive outweighs the negative, where retailers almost inevitably champion blends based on known, high-quality vintages, as they did with the 164th Édition, based on the 2008 harvest and released in 2017.

Krug has also decided to show the Grande Cuvée based on the harvest of the appropriate year at the launches of new vintages. It did this with the impressive 2004, still youthful and tight in its 'luminous freshness', showing the 160th edition of Grande Cuvée alongside to memorable effect, delighting journalists and buyers at the launch.

It turns out that a bottle of this same, but unmarked, Grande Cuvée (160th edition) cellared in 2013, was consumed and greatly appreciated chez moi on Christmas Day. The identity of said bottle was kindly provided afterwards by Olivier Krug from the code 111011 on the shrunken cork, so it works for me too.



CHAMPAGNE



Nicolas Feuillatte

FRANCE



Enchantment awaits

Typiquement Charles



CHAMPAGNE
**CHARLES
HEIDSIECK**

Maison fondée à Reims en 1851

Charles Heidsieck Brut Réserve is remarkable due to the inclusion of 40% reserve wines and a minimum three year's ageing in vast and rare Crayères (chalk cellars)*. Charles Heidsieck is one of the world's most awarded champagnes. Just like his wine, Charles was a man of style and depth, of conviction and character.

* Charles Heidsieck Crayères (chalk cellars) are part of the historical sites of the UNESCO's world heritage list.



BOLLINGER

CHAMPAGNE-BOLLINGER.COM

An eventful 2016 was always going to be a hard act to follow. It climaxed in a one-off June tasting of the best and most significant vintages in the Bollinger cellars, looking at most decades of the 20th century. It also included one of only 13 remaining, successfully restored bottles of Bollinger 1830, 54 of which were unearthed during a massive restoration project at the company's HQ in Ay. Out of these, only a baker's dozen were judged drinkable.

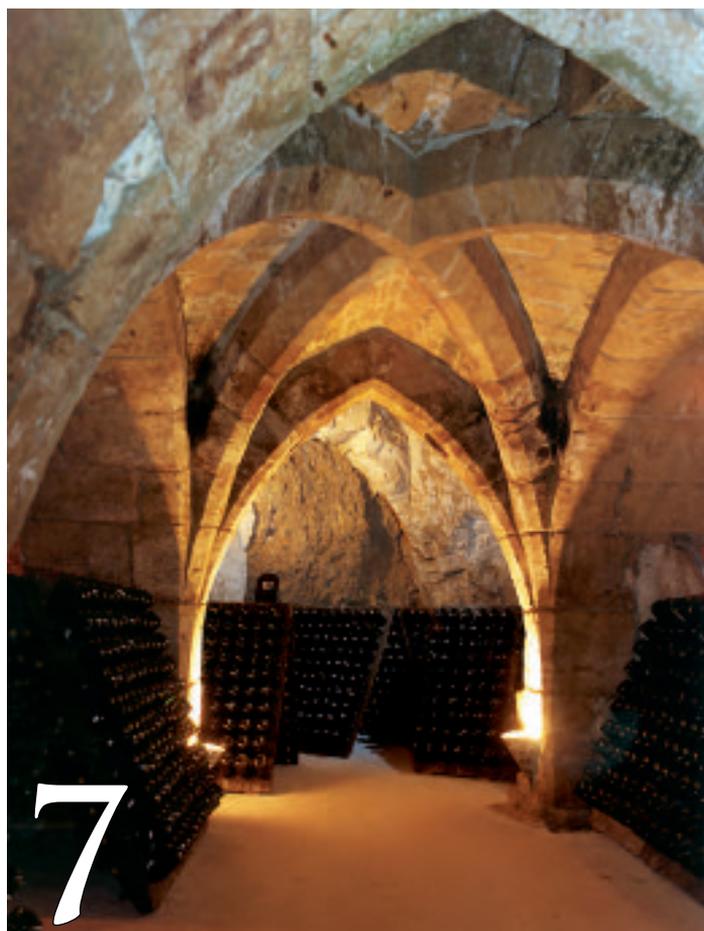
Last year was also the point at which chief executive Jérôme Philipon said goodbye to Champagne, moving off after a decade in charge to Paris, where he's been given a wider brief by the Bollinger

family shareholders as chief operating officer of Société Jacques Bollinger. This oversees Bollinger and Ayala in Champagne, Chanson in Burgundy, Delamain in Cognac, the Loire's Langlois-Château and, in future, other wine operations if plans to expand the business come to fruition.

After Philipon's reforms of the Bollinger business model, no replacement Bollinger president has been appointed. Instead a new role of general manager has been created and filled by Burgundian Charles-Armand de Belenet, previously of Pernod Ricard where he was international marketing director of Martell, Mumm and Perrier Jouët. It will, one suspects, be a case of 'steady as she goes',

keeping this Rolls Royce of champagne production going in the right direction, maintaining the excellent production of Special Cuvée by the winemaking team, ably led by Gilles Descôtes.

One the highlights of Philipon's valedictory year in charge may have been his quite lengthy appearance on *Joanna & Jennifer: Absolutely Changers*, shown on BBC2 in December. In the programme he opened a magnum of Bollinger Grande Année 1992 (the year *AbFab* was first made) for Jennifer Saunders and Joanna Lumley, alias Eddy and Pasty, to, well... quaff.



TAITTINGER

TAITTINGER.COM

Yet another family-run house in the top 10 performers that's risen a couple of places on 2017.

It's a sizeable business too, with around 5m bottles sold each year. It was put back together by the indefatigable Pierre-Emmanuel Taittinger, who fought a lone battle against the wider family's desire to sell up, and more than a decade on the business is thriving. The relatively new team, led by managing director Damien le Sueur and involving two of his children, Clovis and Vitalie, is showing a new confidence.

Evidence of this came with the planting last summer in the heart of the Kent countryside of a new 40ha vineyard of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Meunier for an English fizz to be named *Domaine Evremond*. We will see the first bottle around 2023.

The strength of the champagne part of the business is that it's built on considerable vineyard ownership. In a market where rising grape costs are a constant, Taittinger's ownership of some 288ha of top vineyards, which supply around half its needs, enables it to compete with the corporate strength behind the LVMH and Pernod Ricard-owned brands.

It has large holdings in the Côte des Blancs, and Chardonnay features in most of the house's cuvées. The Brut Réserve has one of the largest percentages of Chardonnay in a non-vintage blend at around 40%.

While *Comte de Champagne*, sourced wholly from Grands Crus Côte des Blancs sites, remains the brand's star attraction, its regular vintage offering a 50/50 Chardonnay/Pinot Noir blend has been getting more attention of late, doing very well in competitive blind tastings run by *The Finest Bubble* over the past year.

JACQUESSON

CHAMPAGNE.JACQUESSON.COM

The Chiquet brothers, Jean-Hervé and Laurent, like to think of themselves more as growers than négociants. They feel that approach is more closely in line with their whole philosophy of vineyard management and winemaking at Jacquesson.

It's no accident that the other members of Trait-d'Union, the small group of producers with which they show their wines, are all récoltant-manipulants and includes

some of the best-known growers in the appellation – Pierre Larmandier of Lamandier-Bernier, Francis Egly (Egly-Ouriet) Jérôme Prevost, Roger Coulon and Anselme Selosse.

The brothers' largely organically farmed domain, which provides 80% of the grapes they

8

need, is located around their base in the top Premier Cru of Dizy.

They have vineyards in nearby Hautvillers, and the Grand Cru of Aÿ, which adjoins Dizy to the east.

In the Côte des Blancs, they have south-facing parcels in the Grands Crus of both Avize and Oiry.

Over the many years I've been tasting their wines the range has changed radically and now they produce no vintage blends – the fabulous 2002 was the last of those and 1995, '90, and '88 memorable vintages before that – just a collection of four single vineyard wines.

Two are from Dizy terroir on their doorstep (one Chardonnay and one Pinot Noir that was made as a vintage rosé in 2002, '03 '04 and '07 but changed to a Blanc de Noirs in 2012) and one each from the Grands Crus of Aÿ (Pinot Noir) and Avize (Chardonnay).

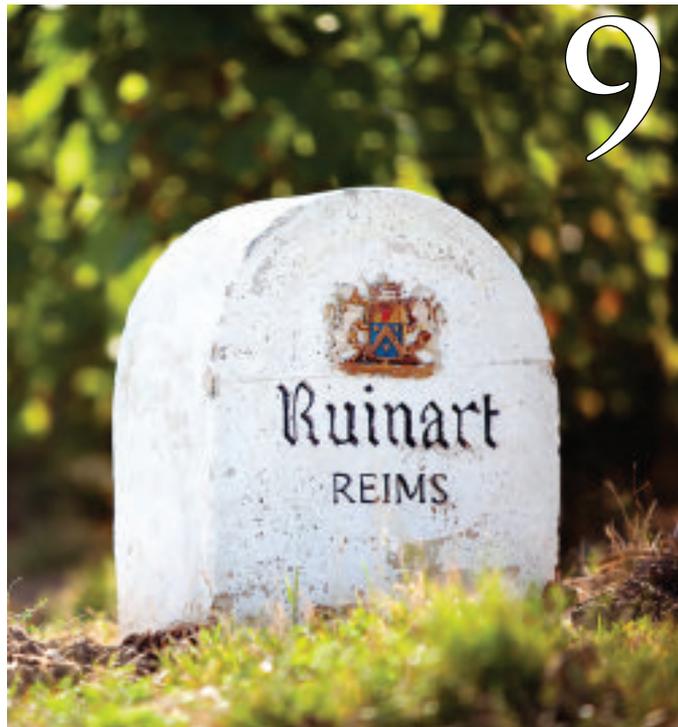
Now as Jean-Hervé explains: "Our Cuvée 700 is the only blended wine we produce. It is meant to be the expression of a year and thus each year offers a different identity which we recognise by numbering the cuvée."

It's meant to be the best possible blend they can make from any individual harvest, not a consistent style.

The latest available blend, Cuvée 739, is based on the 2011 harvest with 31% reserve wine. It's made from all Premiers and Grands Crus juice, while the dosage is a low 2.5g/l.

The blend consists of 57% Chardonnay, 21% Pinot Noir and 22% Pinot Meunier and the brothers made precisely 264,292 bottles, 10,250 magnums and 304 jeroboams.

In complete transparency, all this information is given on the back label of each bottle, along with the disgorgement date.



RUINART

RUINART.COM

The Ruinart brand is one of the great success stories at Moët-Hennessy. It's a classic example of how to change a reasonably successful, well-made champagne that's best known in the French on-trade and thus relatively unspoiled by any discounting, into a significant international player with all of its wines sold at a very attractive premium. All within a decade.

The articulate, multi-lingual, wine-loving chef de cave, Frédéric Panaïotis, has been there since joining from Veuve Clicquot just over 10 years ago and has been an important part of this transformation. He, not various chief executives, has been the public face of Ruinart. Even if you think you already know about champagne, you'll learn a lot if you go to one of his masterclasses on rosé or Blanc de Blancs champagne. The latter is Ruinart's particular speciality and the only all-Chardonnay champagne made in the Moët-Hennessy group apart from Krug's Clos du Mesnil.

Panaïotis and Ruinart are generous at sharing with journalists and trade buyers, library wines that help give an indication of the direction a new cuvée of Dom Ruinart, the house's prestige cuvée, might go in. Thus in March last year (2017) the launch of Dom Ruinart 2006 (white) and Dom Ruinart Rosé 2004, two wines worth turning up to taste on their own, were accompanied by the two previous vintage releases of both, '04 and '02 white plus '02 and '98 rosé.

The rosé is released later because, as Panaïotis says, it takes time to develop. Only around 2% – it might be 1.5%-3% – of Ruinart's production is accounted for by Dom Ruinart, says Panaïotis. He's not sure about the ageing potential of the white ('06) but good palate structure suggests it will age well, he finds it "quite Burgundian". With age the rosé can develop distinctive truffle and gamey notes – it's not a light, fresh, primary fruit style, even when youthful.





CHAMPAGNE
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DOM PÉRIGNON

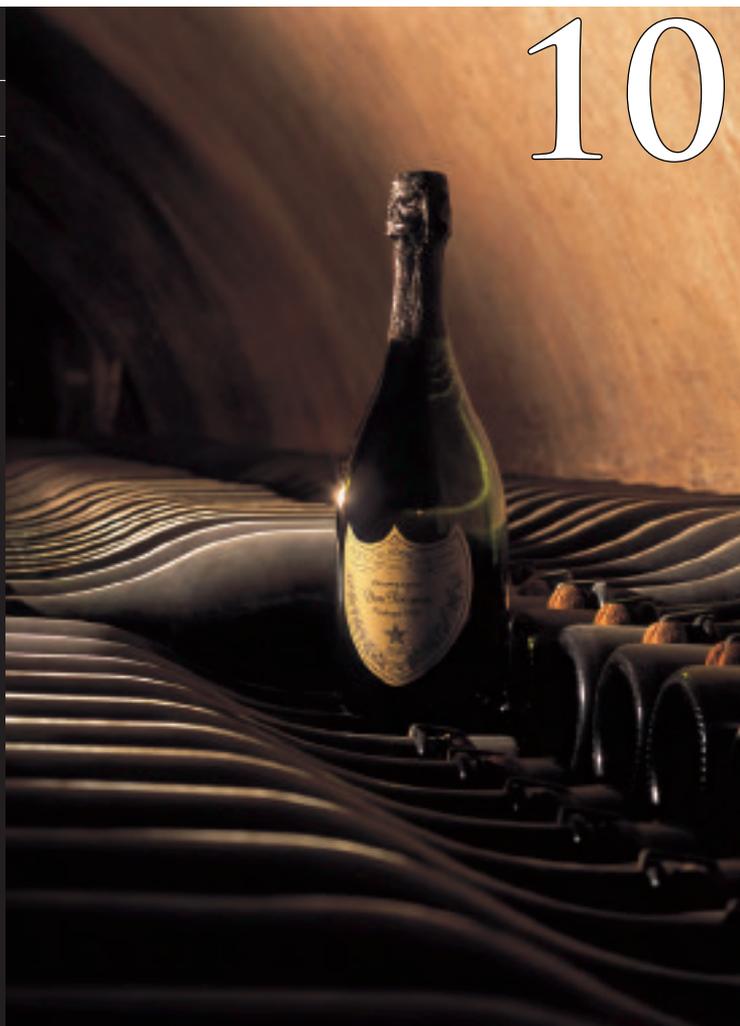
DOMPERIGNON.COM

Last year was a busy one for Dom Pérignon in terms of launches. It started in April with the second plénitude of the 2000 vintage, or P2 as it is now called, plus DP Rosé 2005 but, most significantly, 2009 Dom Pérignon, released before the 2008 vintage. This has been the approach taken by several producers to manage those two very different but high-quality vintages. The '08's vibrant acidity needs time to be tamed, while from the warmer '09 harvest ripe, generous, forward wines, are more approachable at seven or eight years.

Chef de cave Richard Geoffroy concedes launching '09 out of sync isn't ideal. "It will be better in two more years, but is approachable now," he says. "The '08 is quite an animal, another '96 but in a good way. When we released the '03 before the '02, that was the first time we had ever done it. We avoided the same issue with 1988 and 1989, similarly contrasting vintages, by never releasing '89," he adds. Interestingly, Krug released both the '89/'88 and the 2002/'03 vintages out of chronological order.

"We have been blessed by a stunning collection of vintages in the first decade of the millennium. Ripe fruit translating into rich wines. We are doing OK with global warming. In the late '90s I put more pressure on our vineyard team saying I wanted extra ripeness, to see how far we could push the envelope. 2002, '03, '05, '09 and '10 were all warm years. Before there were perhaps one or two warm years per decade, years such as '37, '47, '76 and '89. In the nineties there was nothing extravagant, then in the 2000s, bingo.

"With the '09 we got the fruit as aromatically ripe as we could. Beyond an almost voluptuous richness, there's restrained power and silky, salty, sappy bitter sensations. I hear some people didn't declare '09 – that's a real surprise."



11

SALON

SALONDELAMOTTE.COM

If you want to find Blanc de Blancs styles of champagne with great longevity, you are probably going to go to one of the Grand Cru sites in the Côte des Blancs. Narrow it down even further to a single village, and for many that would be Le Mesnil-sur-Oger. Covering an area of around 410ha, all planted with Chardonnay, it's a base for many fine grower-producers, a top-class co-operative and Salon, which, for many, makes the purest, unadulterated, expression of Le Mesnil fruit.

Salon only makes one wine, always a single vintage, produced from the

1ha plot behind the winery, plus 19 other small plots.

It's not always made, perhaps four times a decade at most. Since the initial 1921 vintage, a great year in Champagne some see as the best of the 20th century, there have been 37 vintage releases up to and including 2006. Total production is usually around 60,000 bottles, but sometimes considerably less.

It's a wine that needs considerable ageing before it's even approachable and it's typically first released after about a decade on its lees. Even then for many palates it's still impenetrably steely. If you

want to see what Salon is really capable of achieving you need to go back over two decades, perhaps to the '90 or '88. Twenty years ago I tasted back to still lively '59 and '43 vintages while '64 in magnum was sublime.

The 2006 vintage, when 53,000 bottles were produced, was launched last summer. Looking ahead the 2007, yields from which were rather higher, will be released in two tranches in 2018 and 2019. The tiny 2008 vintage, which Salon president Didier Depond has high hopes for, was only made in magnums not expected to be released until around 2020. It will be much sought after.





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GOSSET

CHAMPAGNE-GOSSET.COM

The Gosset name and brand will always be linked with the Grand Cru village of Aÿ, where it has claim to be the oldest wine house in Champagne. Originally

Aÿ was famous for making still light red table wine.

Along with Beaune it was the main source of red wine for the French court in the 16th century.

Back in 2009 Jean-Pierre Cointreau – the

Renaud-Cointreau group owner of Cognac Frappin bought the house in 1994 – made the decision to buy the premises in Epernay that used to belong to Château Malakoff as it had outgrown the Aÿ site with production crossing the 1m bottle mark.

This deeply traditional house produces champagne made in a rich, aromatic style with lots of character, which works particularly well with food and logically it targets top on-trade establishments. Its entry level Brut Excellence NV is a decent non-vintage blend, but Grande Réserve at the heart of the Gosset range, always a blend of three years that's aged for significantly longer than most non-vintage cuvées, is a big step up in complexity, concentration and length.

The plan was for Gosset to concentrate its efforts behind what we might call its 'multi-vintage range', the aforementioned Grande Réserve, plus Grand Rosé and the relatively new Grand Blanc de Blancs NV. It's not clear

whether products such as '15ans de cave minima' or the Blanc de Noirs, which might have been seen as a partner for the Grand Blanc, are to become regular lines in the range. Neither are mentioned on the company's website, nor have we tasted them. Perhaps, like the special production of its fine 2004 Grand Millésime, launched in magnum at Christmas in conjunction with Fine & Rare, which claims to have selected the dosage used, it signals a new departure into small scale, one-off bottlings.



HENRIOT

CHAMPAGNE-HENRIOT.COM

Henriot has consolidated its much deserved and meteoric rise in the Most Admired Champagne Brands standings and, with all the changes in how this family business is run behind it and refurbished premises in Reims complete, the future looks rosy. In Laurent Fresnet it has a passionate and widely experienced winemaker to ensure everything in the bottle sings and there's exciting news on the horizon about a new prestige cuvée to be launched later this year, replacing Cuvée des Enchanteleurs.

For someone who has tried quite a few older vintages of this wine, including the fabulous 1959 on more than one occasion, thanks to the Henriot family's generosity, this news is tinged with sadness. The name has resonance, being a reference to when all champagne was made in wooden barrels and the cellar workers who moved them around, called 'enchanteleurs', knew which barrels contained the best wines.

Henriot is very much a Chardonnay-led house – although Enchanteleurs is a 50/50 Chardonnay/Pinot Noir blend. Its Brut Souverain NV, which Fresnet sees as symbolic of the Henriot style, "a mixture of elegance and precision", contains a much larger proportion of Chardonnay than most other big names at around 50%.

Its flagship Souverain Blanc NV is a 100% Chardonnay style blended from a range of top crus, including Côte des Blancs villages – Mesnil, Chouilly, Avize and Vertus – but also Montgueux to the west of Troyes, and Trépail in the Montagne de Reims. Both are famous for the very different styles of Chardonnay they produce, one rich and full bodied, the latter powerful, lean and long-lived. It gets the extra time in bottle that wines of such pedigree demand to show more complex expression.

At the top of the Chardonnay tree comes Cuvée 38, made from a 'solera' of four top Grand Cru Chardonnays – Chouilly, Avize, Mesnil-sur-Oger and Oger – set up by the late Joseph Henriot in 1990 to "concentrate the genie of the marque".

The first magnum-only release in 2014 was based 18 harvests.



CHAMPAGNE
BILLECART
SALMON



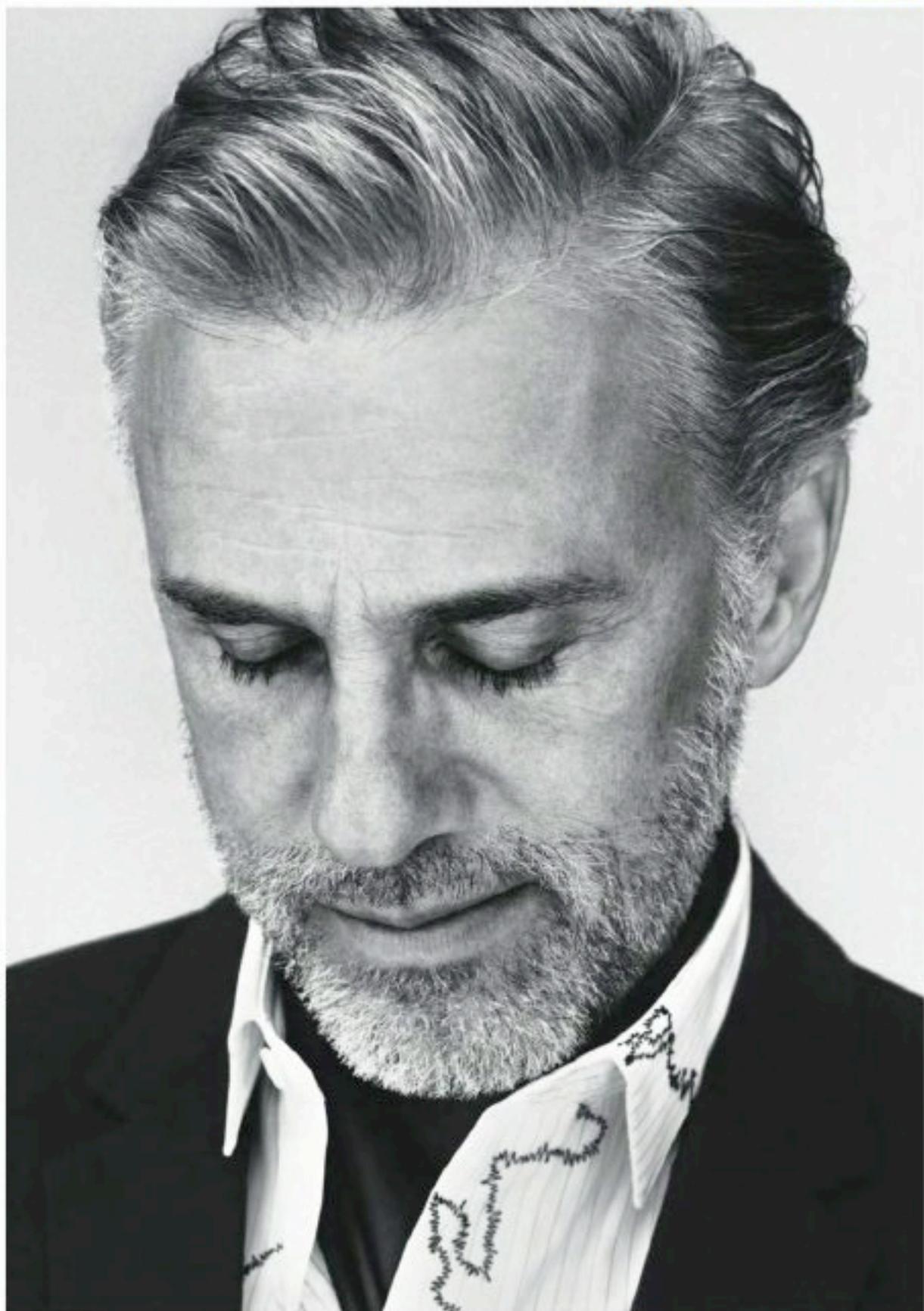
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VEUVE CLICQUOT

VEUVECLICQUOT.COM

After the successful launch last year of head winemaker Dominique Demarville's first solo vintages – 2008 white and rosé – he has now introduced an entirely new cuvée: Extra Brut Extra Old. EBEO was Veuve Clicquot's in-house code and it couldn't find a better name when it came to launch time. "It's Extra Brut, with a dosage of just 3g/l as a consequence of being Extra Old," Demarville says.

In April 2017, Demarville brought the building blocks with him to London, to show how the whole idea was put together. "When I joined Clicquot 11 years ago I found a beautiful collection of reserve wines, a resource that's very

important to the making of Yellow Label (they are the 'spices' used for seasoning it). These are all stored separately in tanks on their lees, naturally without filtration, kept year by year, cru by cru and variety by variety.

"Our oldest is a Cramant [Chardonnay] from 1988, and we still have 80hl left of this."

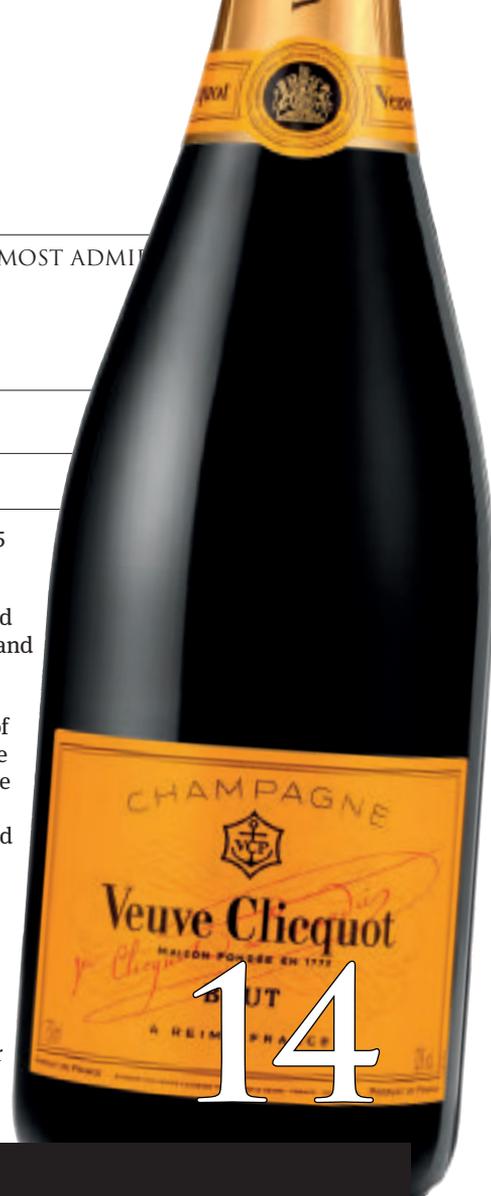
The idea of making a new cuvée entirely from these reserve wines began to take shape in 2011, says Demarville.

The new wine is a pure blend of these reserves from six different harvests, the youngest 2010 and going back through 2009, 2008, 2006, 1996 to the oldest component, which is the 1988 Cramant Chardonnay.

It's also made at a lower 4.5 bars pressure, rather than the more typical 6 bars, because Demarville wanted to enhance the palate feel and texture.

It's partly about shining a light on the importance of reserve wines and their use in Yellow Label, Demarville says.

This is well demonstrated by tasting the current Yellow Label blend based on the 2013 harvest, which has 48% reserve wine in the blend from the six previous harvests, plus a dash of 1999. "We didn't want to create a competitor to La Grande Dame, the house's prestige cuvée."



15

DEUTZ

DEUTZ.COM

Consistent high quality across the range has helped restore the reputation of this traditional Aÿ house to its former celebrated status. Its wines exude understated charm and elegance. At a range tasting with chief executive Fabrice Rosset in October, we're reminded that Brut Classic is a textbook version of a non-vintage cuvée. Fresh, grapefruit citrus flavours give way to a mid-palate boasting biscuity notes and texture, plus a satisfyingly crisp, well-defined finish. The current release has a 2014 base with around 40% reserve wine and a dosage of some 9gm/l.

The 2010 Blanc de Blancs, often an unsung star of the range, shines. Brut Vintage 2012 is even better – inviting warmth, riper and beautiful fruit bode well for long keeping. This leads us to a five-strong vertical of Cuvée William Deutz, 2006 back to 1988. These are subtle, nuanced wines, not powerhouse styles.

"Freshness, elegance and harmony is what we look for," says Rosset. We compare the, generally acid-vibrant, 1996 with 1995 and it confirms the impression seen recently, comparing the straight vintage wines from those two disparate years. The vibrant streak is still there in a long-held but single note, while the '95 has the balance that gives more complexity of aroma and flavour. The 1988 has a dark, smoky, toasty character that evolves into mocha coffee notes with time in the glass.

All this is a long, enjoyable prelude to the 2010 Homage to William Deutz, a 100% Pinot Noir that comes from two superbly located, south-facing plots just above the Deutz winery in Aÿ. "The aim with this savoury, ripe Pinot offering is to put the spotlight on William Deutz." It will be relatively modestly priced at just above the vintage offering. "I like to think of it as an introduction to William Deutz," says Rosset. "We are not going down the Krug route."



CHAMPAGNE
PERRIER-JOUËT

PERRIER-JOUËT, THE ALLURING CHAMPAGNE

Since its foundation in 1811, the champagne house Perrier-Jouët has crafted elegant, floral wines of rare finesse with a Chardonnay hallmark. The elegance of the cuvees echoes that of the Art Nouveau anemones adorning the Belle Époque bottle and offers moments of pure delight and beauty. www.perrier-jouet.com

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16 LAURENT-PERRIER

LAURENT-PERRIER.COM

Last year Laurent-Perrier took the major step of quite radically changing the style of its non-vintage brut, renamed La Cuvée. Initially based on the high-quality 2012 harvest, it will have more Chardonnay in the blend and, says UK managing director David Hesketh MW, a different flavour profile. Tasted side by side with the old Brut NV “there’s a clear difference between the two”.

It is already one of the houses with the largest proportion of Chardonnay in its non-vintage. This now rises from 50% to 55% with Pinot Noir remaining at 35% and Meunier falling to 10%. It also gets extra lees ageing, up from three to four years. In line with long-term trends in Champagne the dosage level falls from 10 to 9gm/l, while the proportion of reserve wine increases, with up to 30% in the new blend.



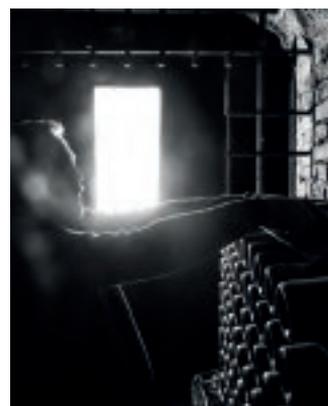
Hesketh says the Chardonnay-dominant style of the non-vintage has evolved from the 45% of the blend it stood at when he started at the company. “Winemaker Michel Fauconnier saw the opportunity of improving the blend after we bought Château Malakoff and its vineyards in 2004, giving him access to more high-quality Chardonnay. The number of crus in the assemblage nearly doubles to around 100. Hesketh says the high proportion of Chardonnay in its non-vintage is one of the reasons Laurent-Perrier doesn’t make a Blanc de Blancs as this wine is its priority.

17 ALFRED GRATIEN

ALFREDGRATIEN.COM

A new entry in last year’s Most Admired Champagne Brands top 30, Alfred Gratien is the biggest mover bar one, rising 12 places. It’s interesting to speculate why. Is it about authenticity? Is there growing interest in wines where oak plays a significant role? After all, there has been a movement back towards using more oak in Champagne. This has not generally been to try to produce obviously oaky wines, but rather in search of something subtler – a gentle aeration in previously used large foudres or barrels to give additional complexity and textural notes. We’ve seen Roederer, Veuve Clicquot, GH Mumm, Lanson and Billecart-Salmon all introduce or increase oak fermentation capacity over the past decade.

It must amuse Nicolas Jaeger, the fourth generation of his family to be cellar master at Alfred Gratien. This very



traditional house based in Epernay never moved away from oak fermentation to stainless steel as most houses did in the ’60s and ’70s. It continued to ferment in 250-litre oak casks, bought second-hand from La Chablisienne cooperative in Chablis today, suppressing malolactic fermentation for further freshness and longevity.

The result is exciting, characterful, expressive wines that develop slowly and improve with further ageing on the cork, particularly the long-lived vintage wines. Some things are worth waiting for.

BRUNO PAILLARD

CHAMPAGNEBRUNOPAILLARD.COM

A man who has worked hard over the years to help steer Champagne collectively in a good direction, Bruno Paillard has championed complete transparency in production. He has been trying to convince his fellow producers to introduce a ban on trading vin sur lattes and arguing in favour of putting the date of disgorgement on all bottles of champagne. He has done this from the outset at his own boutique house, where Paillard set out to produce the highest quality without compromise. He has gradually built up a holding of 32.5ha of vineyards, 12ha of which are Grand Cru, in 15 villages. These 100 individual plots supply more than 60% of the grapes for the house.

The Paillard wines – elegant, crisp and impeccably put together – are mainly sold in the higher echelons of the restaurant business. They can be quite austere in their youth but, with time and accompanying food, they blossom, as anyone who has tried the older disgorgements of the Brut Première Cuvée found on some distinguished restaurants’ lists, will avow.

In 2017 Paillard was one of the very last houses to release his prestige cuvée Nec Plus Ultra from the celebrated 2002 vintage. Intense, concentrated and savoury with some gingerbread notes, this still has a long future ahead and will be even better in another decade.

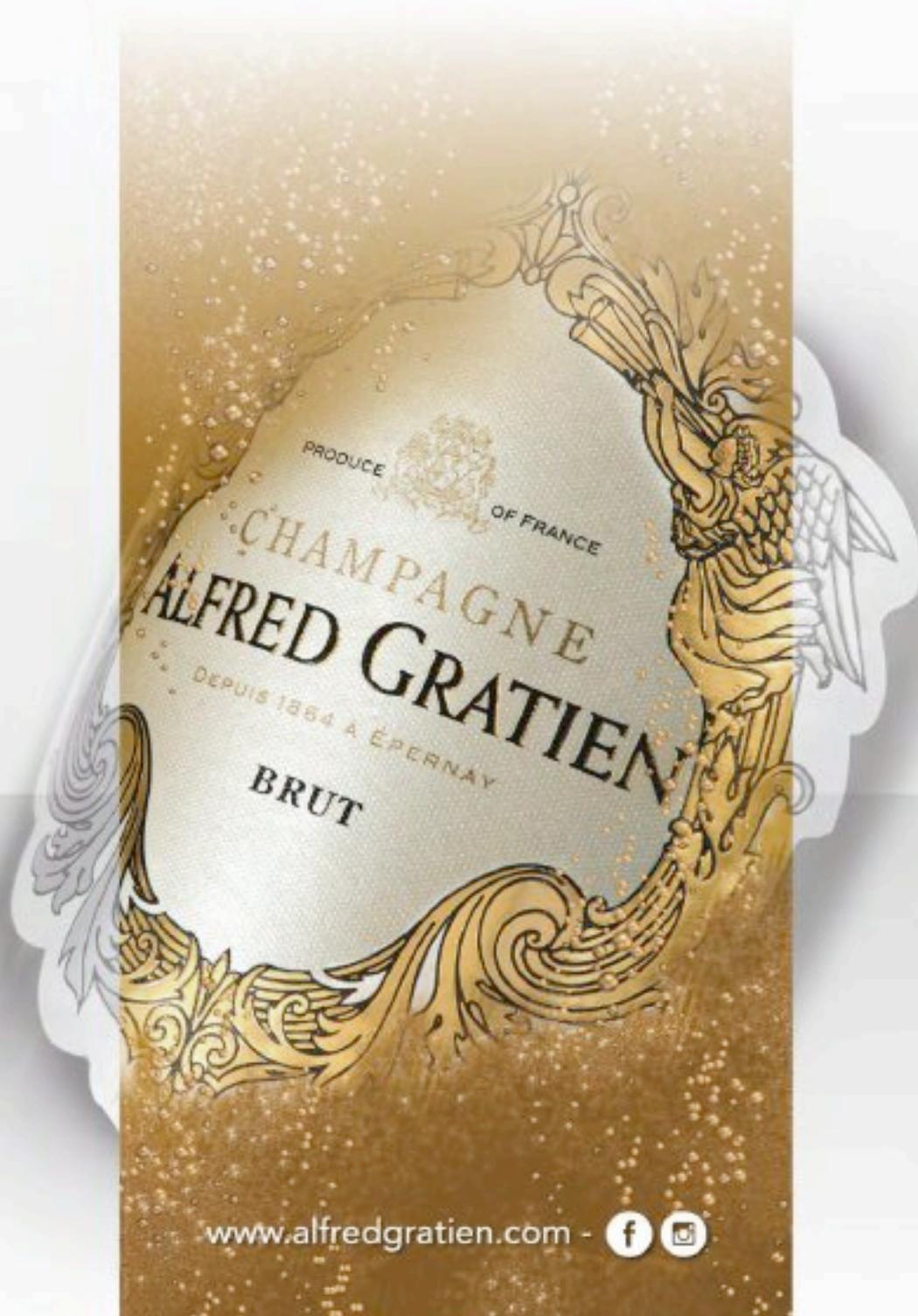


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19

PHILIPPONNAT

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Philipponnat is part of the Boizel Chanoine Champagne (BCC) group, though it operates as an entirely separate entity run by Charles Philipponnat. There were Philipponnats in the village of Mareuil-sur-Aÿ back in 1522, but Charles, brought back to head the house by BCC boss Bruno Paillard in 2006, was an excellent choice for more than just his antecedents. He's revitalised the house, setting out to make vinous wines with real fruit intensity, but balanced with freshness, reflecting the unique terroir.

A focus by the fine wine market on the 'jewel in the crown', Philipponnat's single-vineyard Clos des Goisses, a 5.5ha plot with a 45° incline that faces due south – receiving no shade from sunrise to sunset and probably the warmest site in all Champagne – has substantially raised the profile of the house. This now needs to be translated into more attention for its high-quality Royale Réserve Brut, a consistently fine non-vintage, which benefits from extra ageing, plus reserve wine kept in oak in a 'solera'-type system, adding depth and complexity to the blend.

For those looking for a fairly vinous Pinot Noir-driven style of rosé, Royale Réserve Rosé is one of the best pinks on the market. Talking of vinous styles of champagne, at the recent launch of 2004 Clos des Goisses we had some rare steak served with it, a challenge it easily handled.

20 GH MUMM

MUMM.COM

After years of playing second fiddle to Perrier-Jouët in the Pernod Ricard champagne portfolios, GH Mumm is emerging from the shadows. Head winemaker Didier Mariotti has rejuvenated the non-vintage, prestige line Lalou and vintage cuvées.

More exciting is his work on the gastronomic cuvées, the best known of which used to be called Crémant de Cramant, a wine of renown in Michelin-starred restaurants and at events such as the biennial Bocuse d'Or chefs competition in Lyon.

This cuvée became Blanc de Blancs and Blancs de Cramant (the Grand Cru village where the grapes come from), at which time Mariotti also made a Pinot Noir partner Blanc de Noirs from pure Verzenay fruit I thought even better. In 2016 these two were relaunched under the striking RSRV label as premium vintage cuvées with the superb Blanc de Verzenay from the excellent 2008 harvest and the Blancs de Cramant from 2012 – on this evidence an even better vintage and probably the best Mumm release I have ever tasted.

The RSRV range has now been expanded to include a longer-aged Grand Cru non-vintage and a rosé, but Pernod needs to make more noise about them and then Mumm should shoot up our rankings.



21 PERRIER-JOUËT

PERRIER-JOUËT.COM

Perrier-Jouët has developed its Chardonnay credentials further in 2017 with a new premium non-vintage Blanc de Blancs style. Perhaps the marketing people at Pernod Ricard have been watching the success at LVMH that Ruinart has had with Blanc de Blancs styles. It's worked for others of course, and enables a higher price to be charged for a non-vintage wine in a way consumers may feel is justified. Blanc de Noirs is a much more difficult concept for even vaguely wine-savvy champagne drinkers to grasp. Given that everyone has to increase the 'value' they are getting from highly priced grapes, this is a strategy that makes sense for producers large and small.

The wine has a base of the highly rated 2013 harvest. We are yet to see released as a vintage wine but if this is a sign, it will be impressive. Disgorged in September it had around 30 months on its lees and nearly a year on the cork when tasted in July 2017. We are told the Chardonnay is sourced from some 30 villages in Côte des Blancs, Montagne de Reims, Sézannais and Vitryat. Light, fresh, with a soft, creamy palate it's a classy offering with a planned retail price of £70. With no straight vintage wine in the range any longer, it's a stepping stone between the regular Brut and Belle Époque.



DEUTZ

CHAMPAGNE

Amour de Deutz

ROSÉ

Millesime 2008

BRUT

DEUTZ

CHAMPAGNE

William Deutz

BRUT

Millesime 2008

DEUTZ

CHAMPAGNE

Amour de Deutz

BRUT

Millesime 2008

22 VEUVE-FOURNY

CHAMPAGNE-VEUVE-FOURNY.COM

Brothers Charles-Henri and Emmanuel Fourny, fifth generation of the family, took over running this business in the village of Vertus in 1993. Their vineyards lie almost exclusively within this highly rated Premier Cru (95% on the Échelle des Crus), by some way the largest of the 44 Premiers Crus in Champagne, covering more than 500ha of vineyard.

They own 10ha of vineyard and buy in grapes from another 14ha (five of which they farm) and their parcels divide into around 30 'lieux-dits'. They are mostly planted with Chardonnay on three main soil types: brown topsoil over chalk; rendzina over chalk and brown topsoil over chalky gravel. The average age of the vines is more than 40 years. These parcels are all vinified separately, giving winemaker Emmanuel a much bigger range of material to blend



from than you might imagine is possible in one village.

The wines are pure, refined, elegant expressions of these different sites, mostly very low or no-dosage and often partial or non-malo.

Some, like the fine, chalky vintage cuvée Monts de Vertus, are unoaked. Cuvée 'R', named after the brothers' father, Roger, is vinified in small oak barrels, producing a richly aromatic, savoury style.

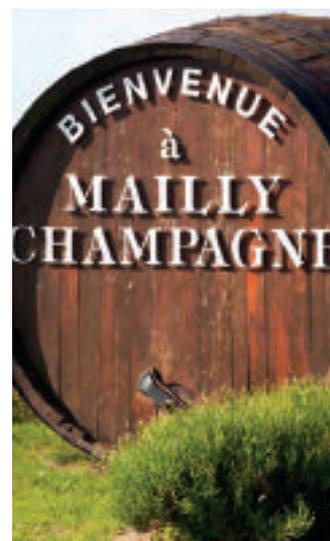
Clos Faubourg Notre-Dame is an intense, honeyed, long-lasting fizz from a tiny walled plot of 0.29ha next to the house replanted in 1951.

23 MAILLY

CHAMPAGNE-MAILLY.COM

Co-operative isn't a dirty word in France, and certainly not in Champagne, where the co-operatives exercise considerable power, thanks to their vigneron members who control a massive chunk of the total vineyard. Most of the top co-operatives work hand-in-glove with the major négociant brands, which need them to source the material they require. But they also produce their own wines, the best of which can be very good indeed and usually represent great value. Thanks to its location, in the middle of the Grand Cru of Mailly, and to the vineyards there its 70 members own, this is one of the very best. They farm some 71ha of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay planted in 480 parcels.

The rich and rounded Brut Réserve is a classic blend of 75% Pinot Noir and 25% Chardonnay with added complexity coming



from older reserve wine, some barrel aged. The Blanc de Noirs is a big, concentrated gastronomic champagne that comes from some of the best Pinot plots – including Les Crayats, Les Coutures and Les Chalois – and benefits from longer ageing. Top of the range Les Énchanson is a vintage wine of real depth and complexity that needs time and puts some of the top offerings from the grandes maisons in the shade.

PIPER-HEIDSIECK

PIPER-HEIDSIECK.COM

Along with its sister house Charles, Piper-Heidsieck was bought by French luxury goods group Entreprise Patrimoniaire d'Investissements in June 2011. But, as the considerably larger-volume brand, sorting out its distribution has taken longer. But these issues have been addressed and now Piper is ready to make the most of its excellent quality credentials, which have seen the brand become one of the most widely awarded in international wine competitions.

Partly to put a distance between what is available in grande distribution and the on-trade, a new, longer-aged and more refined version of the brut non-vintage, itself decent quality for more than a decade now, was launched in 2016. Named Essentiel, it has a lower 'extra brut' dosage and, as chef de caves Régis Camus says: "We have decided to display additional information on the label, such as the disgorgement and cellaring dates, to communicate that extra level of detail to an engaged Champagne audience."

Prestige cuvée Piper Rare, only seven vintages of which have been produced since the first in 1976, now has an 'even rarer', rosé partner. Only 1,200 bottles of the first 2007 vintage are available for all markets initially and the retail price in the UK will be around £325.



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25

HENRI GIRAUD

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Henri Giraud is another of our top 30 producers based in the Grand Cru of Aÿ, in the heart of Champagne. It has a great reputation for its wines, many of which are fermented in oak barrels from the Argonne forest to the east of Aÿ, where the Champenois sourced oak until the end of the 19th century. But when owner Claude Giraud wanted to start using it again, he effectively had to create the supply from scratch as there was no reliable source available. Since then he has become something of a champion of Argonne oak.

The Henri Giraud range is constantly evolving, from the entry-level unoaked Esprit de Giraud white and rosé, through the oaked Homage à Francois Hemart and Code Noir unvintaged champagnes to the Fût de Chêne vintage and multi-vintage wines that are being replaced by Argonne Grand Cru vintage, currently from 2008, which retails for around £250 a bottle.

Late in 2016 Giraud oversaw the opening of a new cellar where all winemaking will be done in oak barrels and egg-shaped terracotta amphorae. The winery is apparently gradually divesting itself of all stainless-steel vats. There are also plans to launch a 'zero residue of pesticide' label called Esprit Nature in January 2018 and later to expand the 'zero pesticides' labelling to the whole Henri Giraud range.

26 MOËT & CHANDON

MOËT.COM

Moët is the one marque that has almost instant worldwide recognition. That Moët Hennessy spends millions to help keep consumers engaged is also vital to stimulate interest in 'brand champagne'. Sensibly it doesn't just spend on marketing – what's in the bottle gets serious attention too from head winemaker Benoît Gouez and his team.

Gouez is generous in sharing the superb library of past vintage wines Moët has built up, doubling the number it keeps back since 1993. At the launch of vintages he shows past similar vintages at different stages in their development, to give an idea about how he sees any new wine developing.

High acidity is not essential for long ageing. Gouez has demonstrated many times that Moët vintages age particularly well in warm years with riper fruit. He's more a fan of the new 2009 vintage than the previous classic, but austere, 2008. "In 2009 everything came together in a natural way," he says. "There's more of a Pinot Noir focus and it's the style we love. There's a structure that gives charm and elegance to the wine, it's not a vinous style of Pinot Noir." It was a warm year in 2009, but "not excessive like in 1996 and 2003". We end with a magnum of 1990, disgorged 13 years earlier in 2004 but still brimming with life.



27 CANARD-DUCHÊNE

CANARD-DUCHENE.FR/

There are changes afoot at Canard-Duchêne as the house celebrates its 150th anniversary. Stanislas Thienot has brought in Cathryn Boudiak as global brand director to oversee the changes and plan future strategy. Boudiak, who worked at LVMH for 14 years, sees this year as a key turning point in the history of Canard Duchêne. "Chef de cave Laurent Fedou has been working tirelessly at perfecting a singular style for the house, driven by Pinot Noir. While this remains his constant challenge, what will change is the way we communicate with our consumers. Champagne needs to remain innovative and attractive in the face of increasing competition, inside and outside the category."

The house is looking to bring to life some of the entrepreneurial spirit of founders Victor Canard and Leonie Duchêne and to build on their heritage establishing the business in the Premier Cru of Ludes, which covers just over 300ha of vineyard.

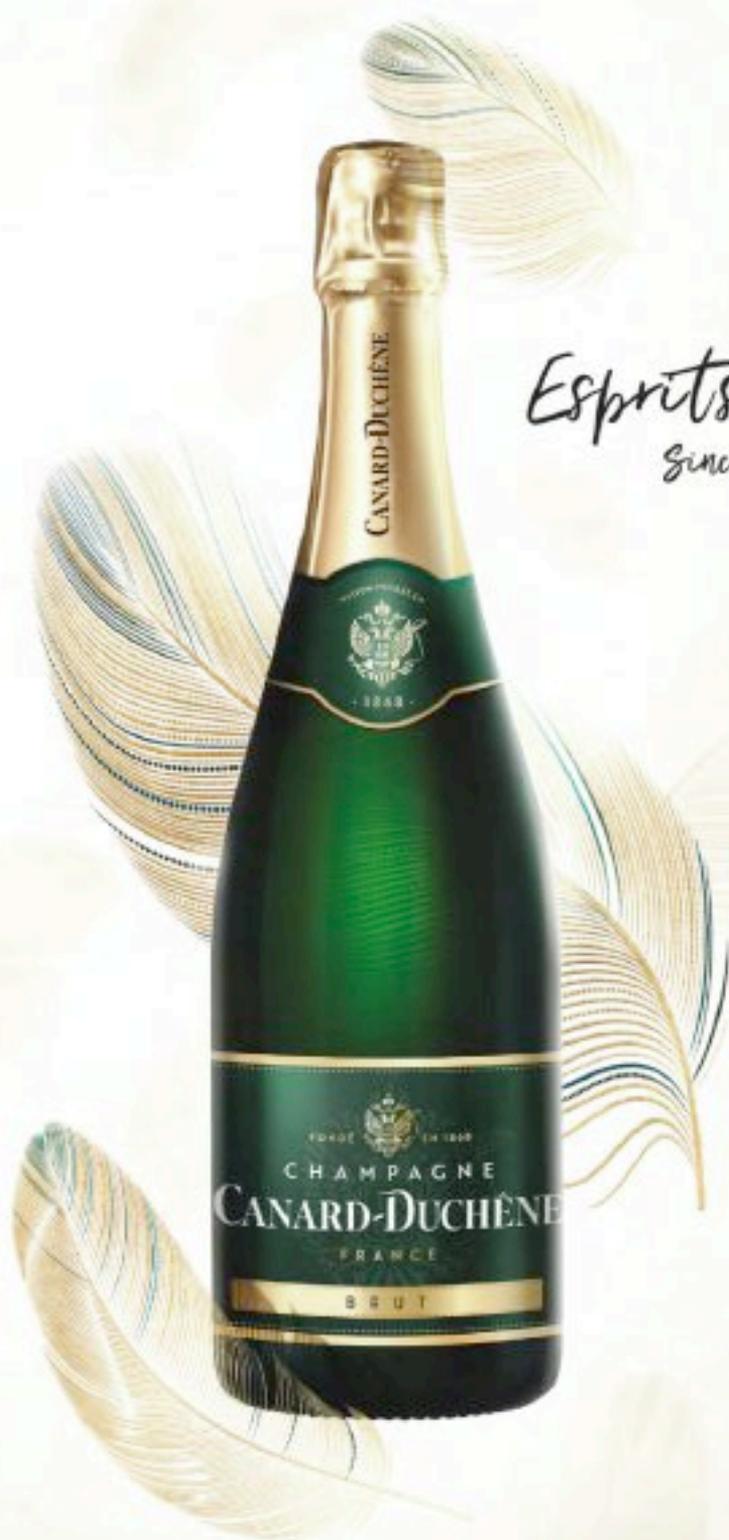
Volume growth to 4.5m bottle sales is no longer a target but perhaps we can expect to see more activity around Canard's organically certified champagnes in both its Léonie and Authentic ranges, as Thienot sees this as a good way of recruiting new consumers and adding value.



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28 NICOLAS FEUILLATTE

NICOLAS-FEUILLATTE.COM

Nicolas Feuillatte is one of the three largest producers of champagne, with brand sales put at 10.4m bottles in 2016 by Impact, and one of its main strengths is access to grapes from 5,000 grower members across the appellation.

But even a producer with ready access to grapes wants to put as large a proportion as possible into premium wine production. So, while it currently has five non-vintage offerings in the large range, the focus of attention should be wines such as the vintage cuvées, including the two grand cru single varietal champagnes, plus the impressive prestige cuvée Palmes d'Or.

Happily the current vintage wines, in the shape of the 2008 Brut vintage and the Blanc de Blancs vintage from the same fine harvest, are great calling cards for the brand. Although



very different in style, with the former about two-thirds black fruit (Pinot Noir and Meunier), both have developed an attractive richness and offer fantastic value for money against similar offerings from other top brands

It will be interesting to see the new strategy from managing director Christophe Juarez, who started last summer and has a strong marketing background. You can be sure that 'adding value' will be at its heart.

29 CASTELNAU

CHAMPAGNE-CASTELNAU.FR

In 2017 Champagne Castelnaud, celebrated its centenary with a relaunch and smart new branding as it gears up to expand sales. Director general Pascal Prudhomme says: "last year I did an audit of our brand which revealed great customer loyalty, but opportunities to widen out appeal to a new audience. Our ambition is to sell 1m bottles by 2020 and 2m by 2025, so reaching an extended audience is key."

Castelnaud's association with the Tour de France since 2012 has helped raise the brand's profile. It shipped just under 800,000 bottles in 2016 and already exports 79% of its volume, with the UK, US, Germany and Belgium the main markets. A new winery is being built which will have a 23,000hl capacity when it opens this year.

Castelnaud reputation for quality is built on its 600-plus



growers, who own more than 900ha of vineyards in 155 crus across the appellation, around half of it in Premiers and Grands Crus.

Castelnaud prestige cuvée Hors Catégorie – a three-vintage blend based on 2010 with reserve wine from 2009 and '08 matured in Argonne oak – was launched in June 2016 and has impressed. But the signature wine remains Brut Réserve, which boasts a lovely richness and complexity thanks to extensive lees ageing of typically at least six years (twice the Champagne norm). Fine recent vintage releases from 2002 and 2003 have also impressed.

ALAIN THIÉNOT

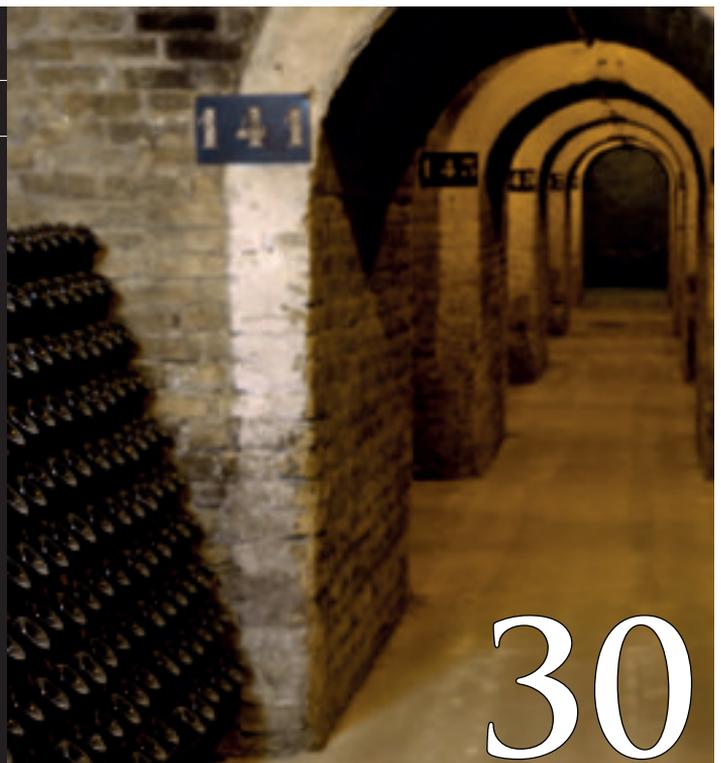
THIENOT.COM

Alain Thiénot, who started out in Champagne finding good sources of grape supplies for other producers, built his own family business on the depth of knowledge of the terroir he acquired in the process.

His first vineyard purchases were 6ha of Pinot Noir in the Grand Cru of Aÿ – that would set you back more than €12m today – followed by plots in the equally, if not more, expensive Côte des Blancs Grand Cru of Le Mesnil. This was a great basis for the house of Thiénot, founded in 1985 and from the start aiming to make gastronomic wines for the table.

Today this family business is run by Alain's son Stanislas with his sister Garance and the 30ha or so it owns supplies four-fifths of the grapes they need to produce 350,000 bottles. Quality is paramount. You can see that from the fine non-vintage brut style right up to the single vineyard La Vigne Aux Gamins (moving from the 2005 to 2006 towards the end of this year). This is a complex, vinous wine that bares comparison with the four of five best single vineyard wines made in Champagne.

Look out for a new Blanc de Blancs cuvée later in the spring and a second colourful Speedy Graphito limited-edition magnum of Thiénot Brut NV, due out in the autumn. The juice inside is a real step up from most non-vintage offerings.



2017 WAS ANOTHER TRICKY HARVEST FOR CHAMPAGNE, REPORTS GILES FALLOWFIELD

It was another eventful growing season in Champagne in 2017, culminating in a harvest that was challenging to manage, with difficult decisions to be made about exactly when to pick. Unusually warm weather in March encouraged early growth then late spring frost hit the vulnerable first shoots in mid-April. Thereafter it was unusually warm, dry and sunny, with the highest May temperatures recorded since 1947 and 50% more sunshine in June than the 10-year average, including 15 days over 30°C.

By mid-July, with little need for vineyard treatments and barely any disease issues, there were predictions for a healthy, decent-sized harvest, despite the potential yield losses to earlier frost. But from the last week of July when it started raining, climatic conditions changed radically. A warm, wet and often very humid August followed – perfect conditions for the widespread development of botrytis, which threatened to ruin the 2017 harvest.

“August 25 was the turning point,” says Lanson winemaker Hervé Dantan. “While in the Aube, the Sézannais, the Côte des Blancs and Vitryat a dry period began, in the Aisne and a large part of the Marne, between 15 and 50mm of rain fell. The four days with temperatures around 30°C which followed sealed the fate of the vintage in these regions [where it rained], because in those humid and hot conditions botrytis was developing fast, particularly effecting Pinot Noir and Meunier.”



RACE AGAINST TIME



Many growers faced the difficult decision between picking clean, but possibly slightly underripe, fruit or waiting for phenolic maturity but running an increasing risk of botrytis spreading. In the end it was a race against time to get in as much healthy fruit as possible. Once started, harvesting was widely completed at a frenetic pace in one concentrated burst of 10 days or fewer, compared with over three weeks in 2016. Rigorous selection was an essential part of the process for those pursuing quality, especially for Pinot Noir and Meunier.

At Krug, for example, they picked “70% of the crop in just five days”, says Olivier Krug, “although we had three weeks between when we started picking in Clos du Mesnil (on August 25 before the harvest opening dates had even been announced) and our last day of picking”. In fact, they completed all their picking in Mesnil-sur-Oger by the official opening date for the village of September 1. And, says Krug, after the first round of vins clairs tastings in January, “we can clearly see it was one of the best decisions we have ever taken”.

Because it was ahead of the black grapes in terms of ripening, Chardonnay is the variety that generally fared best in 2017, with good levels of ripeness, relatively high potential alcohol and few problems with rot. “The quality of the Chardonnay was magnificent, stunningly ripe and in irreproachable condition,” according to Laurent Fresnet, winemaker at Henriot. “Yields are lower than in previous years, but entirely adequate for Maison Henriot.”

“Chardonnays were beautifully mature,” says Perrier-Jouët chef de cave Hervé Deschamps, “but unfortunately yields were low,” as certain villages in the Côte des Blancs, such as Avize and Oger, were hit by the April frosts. “The damage was estimated at 23%

in terms of harvest potential lost,” says Deutz winemaker Michel Davesne, “but it is the areas of Chardonnays that are most affected, villages such as Oger, Villeneuve and Bisceuil [all crus exposed to the east], not to mention certain areas of Mareuil-sur-Aÿ and Aÿ”.

APRIL FROSTS

Taittinger managing director Damien Le Sueur, says the main damage suffered in the April frosts was in “40ha mainly around Murigny, immediately south of Reims, where several of our best plots – mostly Meunier (45%) but 30% Pinot Noir and 25% Chardonnay – were badly damaged and more than 80% destroyed by frost, resulting in a rarely-seen 3,500kg/ha harvest. Our vines on the Côte des Bar, in the Aube region, also suffered from the icy temperatures, yielding a disappointing 6,900kg/ha.”

Côte des Bar-based producer Michel Drappier says: “Global warming has an effect in Champagne, there is no doubt about that. In Urville we had frost again, like Chablis and Burgundy, but much less than in 2016. Last year, the frost was deep and all potential grapes were burnt. This year frost was more superficial, allowing a second bud burst which has covered 50% of the loss.” But they didn’t have the rot problems of further north, “we lost only 5%-10% of the crop through sorting, grapes were healthy,” so, “despite the frost, we have harvested 9,200kg/ha.”

Although it was again one of the Champagne areas worst hit by the April frosts, botrytis wasn’t an issue here and

Pinot Noir in the Côte des Bar, Champagne’s most southerly vineyard, was generally good. “In the Côte des Bar, the situation was quite different from the Marne. The botrytis attack we had in late July has been stopped by the sun and we were not under any pressure to start picking too early [because of rot anxieties], so we have waited a few more days and reached a good maturity without losing quality,” says Drappier. “We picked Pinot Noir at an average of 10.2°. Urville was quite lucky, botrytis had no effect on the quality of the must, it is a pity we had frost. It would have been a great year in both quality and quantity.”

According to champagne’s generic body, the CIVC, after a cold winter, in late January it was below -10°C, the growing season kicked off with mild weather in March – the warmest in 20 years with temperatures 2°C above average. This resulted in an early bud break, around April 4 for Chardonnay, April 6 for Pinot Noir and April 10 for Meunier, 10 days earlier than the 10-year average. This early start made the vines susceptible to late frost, that almost inevitably arrived, with temperatures falling below -5°C on the nights of April 18-20, causing considerable damage to the young shoots and generally cutting overall potential yields by between 20-25%, said the CIVC. It said the heaviest damage was in the north and west of the Montagne de Reims, the Valle de l’Ardre, the Côte des Bar and the sector to the west of Château-Thierry.

By the time the Champagne Comité met in mid-July however, everything was looking set for a decent-sized healthy harvest and they set the minimum potential alcohol level (PAL) at 9.5°. But the weather turned before the end of July and, as Davesne puts it: “The drought observed since the beginning of the year gave way to significant rainfall and a sometimes tropical atmosphere between August 15 and 30. These conditions have slowed down ▶



THE DROUGHT AT THE START OF THE YEAR GAVE WAY TO RAINFALL

the speed of ripening and were particularly favourable for the development of botrytis, particularly among the Pinot Noirs and Meuniers.” As conditions worsened towards the onset of the harvest, some questioned whether the Comité had set the minimum required PAL level too high at 9.5°.

But Moët & Chandon chef de cave Benoît Gouez demurs. “As the final potential alcohol level is close to 10° we can definitely say that an average of 9.5° wasn’t too ambitious.” Cyril Brun, winemaker at Charles Heidsieck, takes a slightly different view. “While we didn’t start picking anywhere more than two days before the official opening date, we managed to pick faster than in previous years to keep ahead of the spreading botrytis. But in many cases the maturity ambition [ie achieving 9.5° PAL] was too high compared with the size of the botrytis problem.”

Brun notes that it’s “always hard to say whether you prefer ripe fruit with some rot problems, or no rot issues, but unripe fruit. There isn’t an answer that fits all situations, it varies from one [grape] variety to another, from one terroir to another. We tried both options, but neither is perfect. Phenolic ripeness you don’t get naturally will hardly be compensated by chaptalisation, so I tend to favour harvesting ripe and then using severe sorting.”

Nicolas Uriel, winemaker at Thiénot, says: “As far as the minimum PAL is concerned, when the profession fixed it in mid-July, we thought it wouldn’t be a problem. Everything looked right in the vineyard, with the weather conditions almost perfect for a good ripening. We have to be ambitious, but this decision may have been made too early.

“We started picking on August 28 in old plots of Meunier in Verneuil (Vallée de la Marne), three days before the fixed opening day, in spite of a PAL under 9.5° (about 9-9.2°). We did this because of the fast



progression of botrytis damage and we didn’t regret this decision,” says Uriel.

Jean-Francois Preau at Mailly Champagne, where picking started on September 3, just one day before the village official opening date, regrets having chosen “too late a start, which at the end of the harvest resulted in very high ripeness levels”. On average they reached 11.29° for Chardonnay, which was very clean and where the evolution of maturity surprised in its speed, and 10.32° for Pinot Noir, which had to be picked more selectively. Preau says one of the problems was the wide heterogeneity in ripeness from village to village and plot to plot. And, due to the botrytis caused by the rainy end to August, “our growers were obliged to be very selective and around 20% of the grapes had to be put on the ground”, Preau says. Picking finished by September 13.

Head winemaker at Jacquart, Floriane Eznack notes: “When the harvest dates were



OUR GRAPE GROWERS HAD TO MAKE DIFFICULT DECISIONS

published on August 26 and the minimum average alcohol content set at 9.5° there was a lot of debate. Some wine growers thought the proposed dates were too late and that the PAL level was too ambitious, considering the health of the vines which worsened by the day, particularly in Pinot Noir and Meunier vineyards. Applications for special permission for villages to harvest earlier began piling up on desks at INAO.

“Planning picking routes (l’ordre de cueillette) was more crucial than ever. Our grape growers sometimes had to make difficult decisions and

compromises between quality and quantity. Sorting was a brave move when some growers only picked three or four thousand kilos of grapes per hectare,” says Eznack.

At Bollinger, chef de cave Gilles Descôtes doesn’t think the Comité set the PAL too high. “No, as is well demonstrated by the simple fact that the average [potential] alcohol level in for 2017 will probably be over 10°. In some places, especially for Meunier it [9.5°] was difficult to reach, but for people who had problems with botrytis, they could ask for a derogation [to pick early].

“The Chardonnay could have started a little bit earlier, but for Bollinger Chardonnay, Cuis is a key cru and as this is a village which tends to ripen later, I think that September 4 [as the start date] was a good choice. For the Pinot Noir, it was difficult to pick earlier as the acidity was still very high, and the ripeness not completed,” says Descôtes.

Despite the immediate

Time becomes Light



pre-harvest weather at the end of August being bad, we managed to reach a yield of 10.260kg/ha," he says. "We reached that level even after a careful selection. We estimate that the loss because of sorting was over 15% on average, but while this was nothing in Cuis, it was a lot more in Aÿ."

For Didier Mariotti, head winemaker at GH Mumm: "It was crucial for us to harvest the grapes quickly, even with a lower level of ripeness, rather than to risk having rotten grapes. This was especially important with warm weather in early September increasing the chance of rot [spreading]. Selective picking was crucial throughout the harvest."

With potential yields in large parts of the vineyard hit by the April frost and more material lost as a result of the rigorous sorting needed to eliminate rot, particularly with Pinot Noir and Meunier, meeting even the relatively low maximum permitted yield of 10,300kg/ha looked challenging. But perhaps surprisingly, the Champenois have got remarkably close to that level, with the provisional figure for the 2017 average yield of 10,057kg/ha just released by the Comité.

For Jean-Hervé Chiquet at Champagne Jacquesson, in the village of Dizy, with the exception of some severe spring frosts, especially in Côte des Blancs, "the weather conditions were almost perfect for vine growing until mid-August, when temperatures and humidity started to increase".

He continues: "Storms followed by some semi-tropical conditions were perfect to develop botrytis. The accumulated quantities of rain were significant and the effect of this was increased by the very high humidity. We were far from reaching the maximum permitted yield.

"We got around 5,900kg/ha in Dizy/Aÿ and 5,300kg/ha in Avize/Oiry. The losses in Aÿ/Dizy were half due to spring frosts and half to severe selection



PINOT NOIR WAS VARIABLE, BUT GENERALLY GOOD WITH PROPER SORTING

at picking. In Avize/Oiry, the problem was almost entirely due to spring frosts.

"It's true that Chardonnay appears to have fared best, but difficult to explain," says Chiquet. "The differences may have been due to the precise moment of the rainfall, related to the ripening stage of the fruits." Average ripeness was higher on Chardonnay at 11.55° with "generally good-looking fruit". Pinot Noir was more variable, averaging 11.05° and while "some fruit was superb, some was terrible". Meuniers were generally OK (averaging 10.45°).

For Jacquesson, while its

vineyard in Aÿ was a disaster, "Dizy [next door] fared much better with almost no botrytis in les Terres Rouges [single vineyard in Dizy], where we farm 6ha, but in the Aÿ vineyards of Vauzelle Terme and Le Léon, at least half the fruit was rotten. Potentially, two of our single vineyards could be considered for vintaging, but it's too early to say."

Henriot's Fresnet says: "We reached 10,300kg/ha with selection, in spite of rot problems for black grapes. This is partly because we have little Meunier, which was hit by frost and rot. Charles Philipponnat, of the eponymous house in Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, says it reached "about 9,000kg/ha on average, more than we expected considering the heavy sorting we had to do".

In terms of quality, "is 2017 a disastrous crop?" Eznack asks. "No, because not all grape varieties and areas were affected [by botrytis]. Chardonnay, for instance, produced beautifully ripe, healthy clusters and

average alcohol content of 10.64° in the winery. It is without doubt the king of grape varieties this year."

For Bollinger Descôtes says: "Chardonnay was perfectly healthy. Late Pinot Noir did well in crus such as Verzenay, Louvois, Bouzy and Tauxières. It was more difficult in our vineyards in Aÿ. The most difficult was for Meunier and we had some problems with many of our suppliers of Meunier. We have started to taste the Chardonnays and they are very good, but the Pinot Noirs are heterogeneous, so I would say that 2017 will likely not turn into a vintage for Bollinger."

"The Pinots Noirs of the Côte des Bars and the Chardonnays will be the big winners of 2017. However, large qualitative variables are expected for Pinot Noir and Meunier," says Lanson's Dantan. From his perspective in Mareuil-sur-Aÿ Philipponnat says: "The Chardonnays were perfectly healthy and very, perhaps too, ripe. Pinot Noir was variable, but generally good with proper sorting and attention, at least in our area."

Asked what the chances of vintage champagne were, he says: "Clos des Goisses certainly, and perhaps some Chardonnay. Pinot Noir-based cuvées unlikely, except some select plots, possibly."

On the harvest overall he says: "Certainly not a general catastrophe like 1984, although a large part of it is mediocre. But don't let critics and journalists kill it. Some very good grapes have been taken in, and most producers have plenty of 'Réserve Individuelle' to play with.

For Eznack and most other winemakers we spoke to: "It is too early to make definitive statements about the quality of the wines, but this harvest is reminiscent of 2010. Years ending in 7 do not tend to make great vintages in Champagne: 1987, 1997, 2007, 2017. But years ending in an 8 are outstanding. 1988, 1998, 2008.

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42 DRINKS INTERNATIONAL

MOST ADMIRED CHAMPAGNES 2018

THE LIST

1	LOUIS ROEDERER	UP 3
2	POL ROGER	UP 2
3	CHARLES HEIDSIECK	UP 4
4	BILLECART-SALMON	UP 1
5	KRUG	DOWN 3
6	BOLLINGER	DOWN 5
7	TAITTINGER	UP 2
8	JACQUESSON	UP 4
9	RUINART	DOWN 1
10	DOM PÉRIGNON	DOWN 4
11	SALON	NON-MOVER
12	GOSSET	DOWN 2
13	HENRIOT	NON-MOVER
14	VEUVE CLICQUOT	UP 1
15	DEUTZ	UP 3
16	LAURENT-PERRIER	UP 1
17	ALFRED GRATIEN	UP 12
18	BRUNO PAILLARD	RE-ENTRY
19	PHILIPPONNAT	UP 8
20	GH MUMM	UP 3
21	PERRIER-JOUËT	DOWN 5
22	VEUVE-FOURNY	NEW ENTRY
23	MAILLY GRAND CRU	NEW ENTRY
24	PIPER HEIDSIECK	RE-ENTRY
25	HENRI GIRAUD	NEW ENTRY
26	MOËT & CHANDON	DOWN 7
27	CANARD-DUCHÊNE	DOWN 3
28	NICOLAS FEUILLATTE	DOWN 3
29	DE CASTELNAU	NEW ENTRY
30	ALAIN THIÉNOT	DOWN 4

sur Chisquot Ponsardis



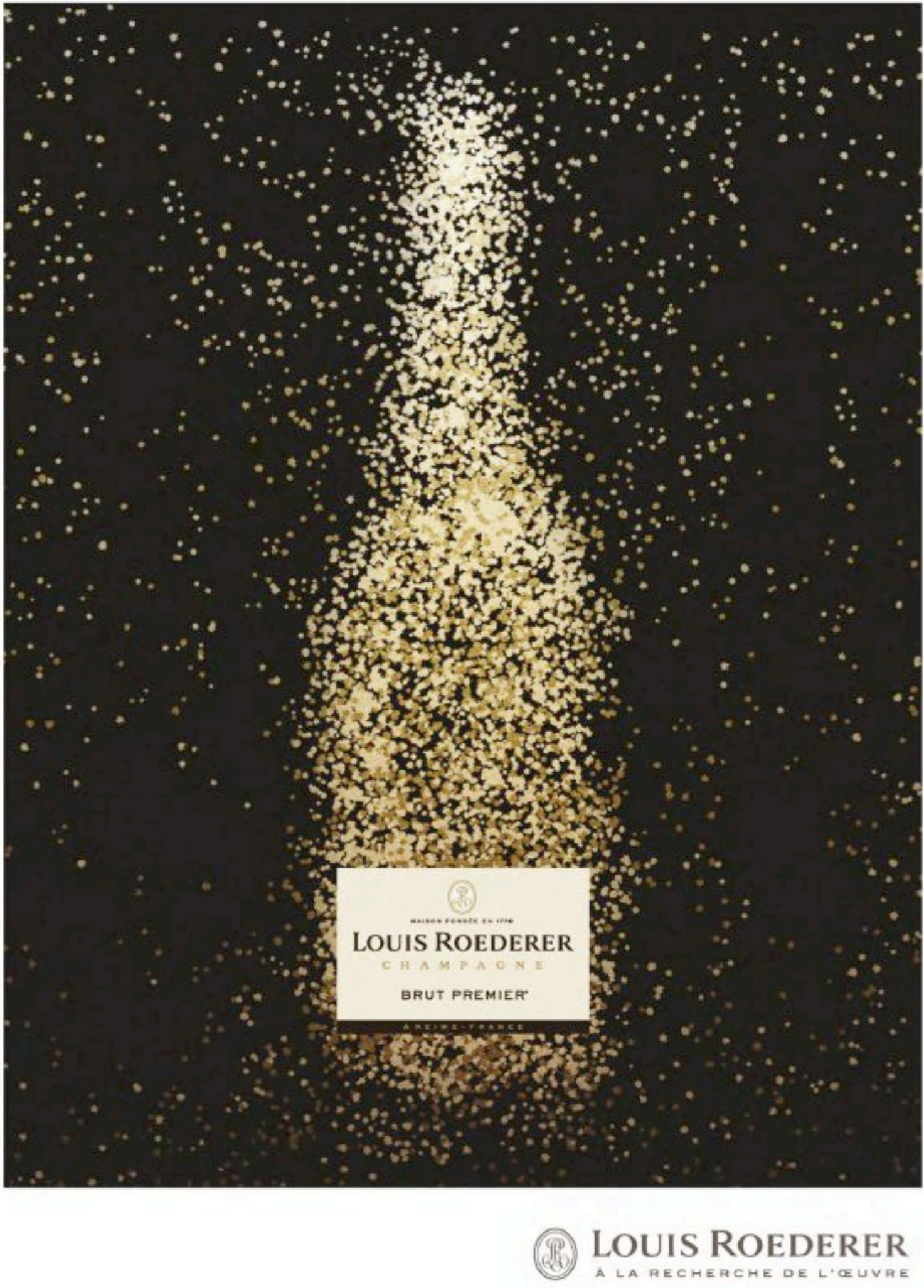
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