

Champagne

Tom Stevenson

Champagne has put itself in danger of a severe reprimand from INAO and the EU following the 2004 harvest, which was the largest in the region's history.



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It was larger, even, than the disastrous 2001 harvest, which had a maximum yield of 11,000 kg/ha, yet averaged 17,000 kg (equivalent to just over 108 hl/ha). After 2001 there were strong warnings from Yves Bénard, president of the UMC, and Philippe Feneuil, president of the SGV, both of whom called for a reduction in yields before restrictions were imposed by INAO. The *Champenois* obviously took little notice because, although the maximum yield for 2004 was a more-than-generous 14,000 kg (maximum of 12,000 kg, plus 2,000 kg *en blocage*), the average yield was a whopping 23,000 kg (146.5 hl/ha). If this was for *vin de table*, it would be 56.5 hl/ha above the maximum yield (90 hl/ha) and the entire lot would be carted off for distillation...

It wasn't us, guv, honest!

The biggest excuse for the obscene level of overproduction in 2004 was that the bunches harvested were twice as large as that predicted by the

TOM STEVENSON has specialized in champagne for more than 25 years. *Champagne* (Sotheby's Publications, 1986) was the first wine book to win four awards, and it quickly established Tom's credentials as a leading expert in this field. In 1998, his *Christie's World Encyclopedia of Champagne & Sparkling Wine* (Absolute Press, revised 2003) made history by being the only wine book ever to warrant a leader in any national newspaper (*The Guardian*), when it published a 17th-century document proving beyond doubt that the English used a second fermentation to convert still champagne into sparkling wine at least six years before Dom Pérignon even set foot in the Abbey of Hautvillers. Tom has judged in France, Germany, the United States, and Australia, and he is chairman of the champagne panel at the *Decanter* World Wine Awards. His annual Champagne Masterclass for Christie's is always a sellout.

Association Viticole Champenoise (AVC). Since growers use the projected bunch weight to green-harvest to desired crop levels, they cannot be blamed if they end up with double the crop they bargained for, can they? Well, it depends on what their desired crop level was. Furthermore, the bunches were not double the size predicted by the AVC. The actual figures were 45 per cent for Pinot Noir, 43 per cent for Chardonnay, and 22 per cent for Meunier. When the surface area planted for each variety was taken into consideration, the final harvest was just 36.6 per cent larger than predicted, thus we can determine that, overall, the *Champenois* had been aiming for cropping in excess of 16,800 kg/ha. That is an average, of course. There are plenty of good guys who pulled that figure downwards, which explains how often I came across yields of 25,000–30,000 kg on the Côte des Blancs – one grower even proudly claimed to have produced 44,000 kg of "high-quality" Champagne. So, yes, the growers can be blamed.

The Not Working Committees

In *Wine Report 2004*, I reported on INAO's work committees, which were supposed to visit the vineyards to detect any aberrations and, primarily, look for signs of overproduction. They are meant to warn guilty growers that if they do not act immediately to reduce obviously high yields, they would face declassification for their entire crop. Following Champagne's 2004 harvest, which came in at a regional average of 23,000 kg, I have to wonder what yield it takes for INAO to declassify a grower's entire crop.

Grapevine

- **Two champagne trophies** were awarded at the second *Decanter* World Wine Awards in 2005 because the specialist panel could not decide between two superb champagnes of contrasting style. Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs 1995 Taittinger picked up the Vintage Champagne Trophy, while Brut Réserve Mis en Cave 2000 Charles Heidsieck took the Non-Vintage Champagne Trophy. The indecision was also palpable at judging of the International Sparkling Wine Trophy, as a different panel composed entirely of regional chairs tried to choose between the same two champagnes. It was decided not to reveal that one was non-vintage and, although both were complex

champagnes of great finesse, it came down to a choice between complexity and minerality. Readers will have to check out decanter.com to find out which champagne won the International Trophy.

- **Bruno Paillard** took over the Maison René Jardin in Mesnil-sur-Oger on 16 November 2004. The deal included 21 ha of vineyards in Bouzy, Etoges, Festigny, Mesnil-sur-Oger, Oger, Les Riceys, and Vertus. Prior to this transaction, Bruno Paillard owned just 3 ha, representing just over 4 per cent of its production. The current 24 ha represents 20 per cent and includes 11 ha of *grand cru* vineyards.

THE MAGNUM EFFECT

Some years ago, while I was tasting a vertical of Croser sparkling wine with the great man himself, he asked me whether I thought the 'magnum effect' (slower development, thus greater finesse) occurred before disgorgement, as well as after. He did not seem to think it did, but it was a good question. There is no disagreement about the superior evolution of magnums over 75-cl bottles after disgorgement, since the greater ratio of wine to oxygen in magnums results in less oxidative

characteristics, thus magnums are 'younger', fresher, and have more finesse than bottles. However, there is no oxygen left in a sparkling wine after the second fermentation, since it is depleted by yeast growth. So if there is a pre-disgorgement magnum effect, what could be the explanation? First, I had to discover whether there was such an effect, so in February 2005 I tasted (blind triangular) magnums and bottles of eight champagnes (Ayala 1998 Brut, Bollinger 1997 Grande Année, Jacquesson 1989 Non Dosé, Jacquesson 1995 Grand Vin Signature

Extra Brut, Jacquesson 1996 Avize Grand Cru Extra Brut, Lanson 1996 Gold Label, Pol Roger 1996 Vintage, and Taittinger 1999 Brut Millésime). In each instance, the magnums and bottles had been disgorged just days apart, and all had been fairly recently disgorged, thus offering no opportunity for any development of the post-disgorgement magnum effect. For seven of these wines, the magnum scored 2–4 percentile points higher than the 75-cl bottle. The only exception was the Lanson, which scored exactly the same. There are many possible reasons why the Lanson performed as it did, but none that can explain the superiority of magnums of the other seven wines, unless the magnum effect does indeed

begin before disgorgement. So how can this be explained? While all the oxygen is exhausted during the second fermentation, we now know that there is an ingress of oxygen into a champagne on its lees by exchange of gases with CO₂ egressing from the bottle, and the permeability of crown caps is such that this results in exactly the same volume of oxygen for magnums as it does for 75-cl bottles (Valade et al, 1995). Even before disgorgement, magnums possess twice the ratio of wine to oxygen, thus the magnum effect occurs both before and after disgorgement, but it is simply more perceptible after disgorgement; and the longer the post-disgorgement period, the more noticeable it becomes.

Grapevine

- **Bollinger snapped up Ayala** in January 2005. The deal included the impressive Château d'Ayala and stocks, but not vineyards, which the previous owner, Frey (which has a 45 per cent shareholding in Billecart-Salmon) retained. The stated aim is to do "another Deutz", and it would be wonderful if this turned out to be true, but to do that Bollinger must allow Ayala's new managing director, Hervé Augustin, the same autonomy as Roederer has allowed Fabrice Rosset, and it must give Augustin equal financial resources. Not only that, but Bollinger must have the self-confidence to allow Ayala to rival it in quality and reputation; and given the raw materials, the right winemaker, and inspired direction, Ayala *could* rival Bollinger. For his part, Augustin has to lean more on his recent period with Bollinger than his longtime experience in charge of De Castellane if he is to bring class and quality to Ayala, rather than commercial kitsch. And with Nicolas Klym having served 20 years as *chef de caves*, retirement must be becoming, so Augustin must be prepared to head-hunt one of Champagne's winemaking stars. But can he do it, and will Bollinger let him?

- **It is well known** that Marne et Champagne bought Lanson from LVMH at the top end of the market in March 1991 and has been paying the price ever since. Things came to a head in 2004, when the bank withdrew its support, and it appeared that the company would be unable to pay its growers the final payment for their grapes. Until, that is, the Moras struck a deal with the Caisse Nationale des Caisses d'Épargnes. Until then, this huge old French savings bank had been the personification of its centuries-old logo (a squirrel holding a bag of nuts), but Caisses d'Épargnes was interested in widening its activities. It seems like a perfect marriage, with the Moras selling off their debts for just 44 per cent shareholding, allowing them to retain majority ownership, and Caisses d'Épargnes using Marne et Champagne to get its foot in the door of the champagne industry. Financing champagne producers is just as lucrative in the busts as it is in the booms – arguably more so – but until now was pretty much sewn up by the Crédit Agricole. Since the new shareholding, Marne et Champagne has changed its name to Lanson International.

Grapevine

- **Alfred Gratien** misses out on a place in my Top 10 greatest champagnes not because of any lack in quality, but due simply to the fact that the wine in question, The Wine Society's Exhibition Blanc de Blancs, is available only in the UK, and wines listed in any *Wine Report* Top 10 are priced in local currency of the country of origin, which is a shame. But it's my book, so I'll plug it here! This non-vintage *blanc de blancs* has such precision of Chardonnay fruit, with minimal *dosage* and rapier-like acidity, that it is like a great *grand cru* Chablis with bubbles. It is enough to make any non-members join up just to buy it!
- **Two wrongs** make the right champagne for Jean-Marie Le Pen, it seems. The man who described the Holocaust merely as "a detail in history" has hooked up with renegade *vigneron* Patrick Bourson to purchase François Daumale, a small champagne house in Rilly-la-

Montagne. Bourson has a past conviction for armed robbery and has served five years in Clairvaux prison. His wife, Cathérine Bourson, is the elected representative of Le Pen's Front National for the Champagne-Ardenne region. Le Pen and Bourson are also reported to have announced their intention to set up rival bodies to the existing CIVC, UMC, and SGV.

- **As reported last year**, the Lombard family sold Cazanove to the Rapeneau group (presumably because it had lost the Maxim's contract to Cattier), following rumoured losses from *sur lattes* deals with Bricout. However, following the recovery package agreed between LVMH and Vranken, the tribunal ordered Bricout to return the unpaid bottles. Having suffered no financial loss, Thierry Lombard has reinvested by purchasing Médot to supplement sales under his remaining brands (Lombard & Cie, H Lanvin, and Magenta).

Opinion:

Champagne's mood swings

As I have said many times, the *Champenois* are manic-depressives: they respond to the moment, and because champagne is cyclical, they act as if they are on uppers and downers, as sales go from boom to bust and back to boom again. When sales are booming, they know with total conviction that everything they do is absolutely right, and no amount of logic will change their mind. When the bottom drops out of the market, they openly admit that they have made mistakes but spend too much time and money trying to work out solutions that should be staring them in the face. More often than not, they make no change or the wrong change and are seldom willing to make a radical change. To make matters worse, they cling on to booms and busts even as the fortunes are turning. They are enjoying a boom, so we cannot expect any recognition of, let alone change to, the issues that threaten Champagne's long-term success.

- The imbalance in vineyard ownership continues to create tensions in supply and demand, which, history shows us, has turned relatively harmless fluctuations into damaging booms and busts at critical moments.
- Disgorging vintage champagnes to order is harmful to the reputation of producers, since the same champagne can be found at different stages of evolution in numerous markets throughout the world. Consumers wonder if they are different wines, and critics continue to avoid reviewing champagne for fear of looking foolish.
- René Renou, the director of INAO, has called for new super-AOCs to highlight excellence and individuality, but Champagne, like the rest of French wine bureaucracy, prefers to maintain the status quo, which guarantees nothing more than mediocrity. Bollinger's Charter of Ethics and Quality prompted a flood of back labels from other producers assuring consumers of quality criteria superior to those of AOC champagne. Yet the *Champenois* cling on to their antiquated single-wine AOC, which not only fails to guarantee sufficiently high standards but also gives equal status to the *premier prix*, the finest grower champagnes, and Krug.
- The region's sponge vineyards still exist. These are lower-classified vineyards that are used mathematically to allow *grand cru* vineyards under the same ownership to be cropped over the limit.

Vintage Report

Advance report on the latest harvest

2004

Although the flowering took much longer than usual due to fluctuating temperatures in June, the flower set was even. Summer began well, and by August the vines were growing evenly and looking very healthy, except for an inconsequential amount of oidium. However, August itself was so wet and cold, and the potential size of the harvest so large, that the *Champenois* were afraid it would not ripen. Had September been wet, it would have been another disaster, like 2001, but it was sunny, with cool, clear nights. Despite the size of the crop, the grapes not only ripened evenly, but they ripened at twice the normal rate (by 1.5 per cent ABV, rather than 0.8 per cent) and, amazingly, continued to grow in size as they ripened! The explanation is now known as the '2003 effect' – reserves of plant sugars residing in the roots of vines that were prevented from producing a crop in 2003 boosted the vine's metabolism in 2004. It required the right climatic conditions, and in September it got it. The *vins clairs* are classic, with the best acids I have tasted in years (thanks to the diurnal difference). This is a vintage on steroids, but the *Champenois* need to understand that the only thing that stopped 2004 becoming another 2001 was the luck of weather in September, and they need to ask themselves how lucky they are in September most years...

Updates on the previous five vintages

2003

Vintage rating: 50–95

The earliest Champagne harvest since at least 1822 (when records began) and, with 50 per cent of the potential crop destroyed by spring frosts, the smallest harvest since 1981. The second crop from buds that developed after the frost was substantial, and although a second crop is a common phenomenon in Champagne, it rarely ripens, and almost never on a region-wide scale, being known in *Champenois* dialect as the *bouvreu* ("for the birds"). Having tasted a number of 2003 *vins clairs*, it is obvious that some truly special champagnes will be produced, albeit mixed in with a motley crew of the weird and ugly. The *vins clairs* of Jacquesson best reflected 2003's sumptuous richness, while Krug and Roederer displayed exceptional acidity for the year. (One of those rarely mentioned facts is that acidification has always

been permissible in Champagne, while it remains illegal further south, except for this sweltering hot year when a unique dispensation was given.) Considering the small size of the crop and proportionately greater scarcity of Chardonnay, a number of houses might not release a standard vintage, but any producer who has not done his or her best to make a small volume of pure 2003, even if only for in-house use, will live to regret it as global warming continues and they have no library bottles to learn from.

2002

Vintage rating: 85–90

This is without doubt a vintage year, and a very special one, too, marked by the *passerillage* that reduced the crop in some vineyards by up to 40 per cent and endowed the wines with the highest natural alcohol level since 1990 (which itself was the highest since 1959). It is definitely a Pinot Noir year, with Aÿ-Champagne the most successful village. There are some fine Chardonnays, but in general they are less impressively structured and lack acidity. Not that the Pinot Noirs are overblessed with acidity. Low acidity is a key feature of this vintage, with *vins clairs* tasting much softer than their analyses would have us believe.

2001

Vintage rating: 35

Dilute, insipid, and unripe. Anyone who declares this needs their head testing.

2000

Vintage rating: 80

Virtually vintage-quality ripeness, but more of a good non-vintage year, although there are a lot of *Champenois* who believe that 2000 is a magical number, so we can expect more declarations from this year than it really deserves. However, good, even great, champagne can be made in almost any year if the selection is strict enough, and with so many 2000s likely to be marketed, there should be plenty of good bottles to pick from. Generally soft, forward, and easy-drinking in style, while some really special wines – such as Philipponnat's Clos des Goisses, Jacquesson Dizy 1er Cru Corne Bautray, and Pierre Gimonet's Fleuron *en magnum* – will be great.

1999

Vintage rating: 82

Vintage-quality ripeness, but the worst acidity and pH levels Champagne

has seen for a couple of decades. Some very good champagnes will no doubt be made through strict selection, and this vintage is beginning to assert itself over the 2000s. Chanoine's new vintage Tsarine Rosé, Drappier's Grande Sèndrée, Roederer Blanc de Blancs, and Vilmart's Grand Cellier d'Or are the standouts.

GREATEST WINE PRODUCERS

- 1 Krug
- 2 Pol Roger
- 3 Billecart-Salmon
- 4 Louis Roederer
- 5 Bollinger
- 6 Deutz
- 7 Jacquesson
- 8 Gosset
- 9 Pierre Gimonet
- 10 Vilmart

FASTEST-IMPROVING PRODUCERS

- 1 Vilmart
- 2 Bollinger
- 3 Mumm
- 4 Bruno Paillard
- 5 Philipponnat
- 6 Mailly Grand Cru
- 7 Duval-Leroy
- 8 Moët & Chandon
- 9 Pannier
- 10 Vve Devaux

NEW UP-AND-COMING PRODUCERS

- 1 Serge Mathieu
- 2 Fluteau
- 3 Bruno Paillard
- 4 Audoine de Dampierre
- 5 Chanoine's Tsarine range
- 6 Henri Giraud

BEST-VALUE PRODUCERS

- 1 Charles Heidsieck
- 2 Serge Mathieu
- 3 Henri Mandois
- 4 Duval-Leroy

- 5 Alfred Gratien
- 6 Bruno Paillard
- 7 Lanson
- 8 Louis Roederer
- 9 Drappier
- 10 Piper-Heidsieck

GREATEST-QUALITY WINES

- 1 **Vintage Collection 1964**
Moët & Chandon *en magnum* (€320)
- 2 **Vintage Brut 1996**
Pol Roger *en magnum* (€80)
- 3 **Grand Siècle NV**
Laurent-Perrier (€60)
- 4 **Mis en Cave 2000**
Charles Heidsieck (€24)
- 5 **Cuvée Nicolas François Billecart 1996** Billecart-Salmon
- 6 **Grande Année 1997**
Bollinger *en magnum* (€140)
- 7 **Blanc de Blancs 1999**
Louis Roederer (€45)
- 8 **Grande Cuvée NV** Krug (€120)
- 9 **Rosé Brut 1998** Pol Roger (€35)
- 10 **Coeur de Cuvée 1998**
Vilmart (€35)

BEST BARGAINS

- 1 **Gold Label 1996** Lanson (€27.50)
- 2 **Grand Cellier d'Or 1999**
Vilmart (€22.50)
- 3 **Brut 1995** Arlaux (€23.50)
- 4 **Blanc de Blancs Fleuron Brut 1er Cru 2000**
Pierre Gimonet *en magnum* (€50)
- 5 **Grand Vintage 1998**
Boizel (€25.50)
- 6 **Brut 1998** Deutz (€32.50)
- 7 **Blanc de Blancs Gastronomes Brut 2000** Pierre Gimonet (€18)

8 Tsarine Rosé 1999

Chanoine (€29.95)

9 Premier Cru Blanc de Blancs Millésimé 1999

L Besnard-Pitois (€18.90)

10 Brut Club de Viticulteurs 1999

Marc Chauvet (€19.40)

MOST EXCITING OR UNUSUAL FINDS**1 Clos du Mesnil 1992** Krug (€400)*A 1992 that is infinitely superior to its own 1990 – now that must be news!***2 Gold Label 1996** Lanson (€27.50)*Last year's "razor blades" are melting into richly, yeast-complexed fruit, giving the mousse a smooth, creamy finesse.***3 Celebris Rosé 1998** Gosset (€75)*A textbook example of intensity meets finesse.***4 Corne Bautray 2002** Jacquesson*(€35) The best vintage yet of this lieu-dit blanc de blancs, although it will be a while before it is released, since not even the first vintage, 2000, has been launched (which is a pity; I think these single-vineyard champagnes express their terroir at an early age).***5 Brut Cuvée No. 729 NV***Jacquesson (€25) Dear, oh dear... Jacquesson guaranteed that its new non-vintage would make the best champagne in any given year, rather than pander to house style, but although 729 is extraordinarily good for a 2001-based cuvée, it is**also very Jacquesson in style – and it is so similar to Cuvée No. 728 that it must be considered an abject failure!***6 Cuvée Orpale Grand Cru Brut 1995** De Saint Gall (€53)*Not cheap for a cooperative champagne, but every now and then Union Avize makes a stunning quality under its prestige cuvée label, and this is one such wine. The last was 1985, with nothing comparable in between.***7 Authentis Petit Meslier 1998***Duval-Leroy (€53) Much too oaky, but since this is the best example of this ancient Champenois variety produced to date, perhaps we cannot see the grape for the wood?***8 Perle d'Ayala 1998** Ayala (€65)*The name for Ayala's new prestige cuvée is reminiscent of cheap, semi-sparkling wines, but there is no doubt about the quality. A combination of richness, complexity, and finesse not seen in any of this producer's previous champagnes.***9 Grand Cellier Rubis Brut 1998***Vilmart (€33) Despite all the praise I have heaped on this grower over the last 15 years, I have never seen fit to recommend Vilmart's rosé. Until now, and what a beauty it is!***10 Jean de la Fontaine 2000** Baron*Albert (€15) Very fine, fresh and beautifully focused finish. Albert Baron seems to excel with this cuvée in lesser vintages.***Grapevine**

• Recently published books on champagne include *Destination Champagne* by Philippe Boucheron (Wine Destination Publications, £18) and *Uncorked: The Science of Champagne* by Gérard Liger-Belair (Princeton University Press, £12.95/€16.27/\$19.95). Boucheron has 'slept

around' in Champagne for many years, and with this book to hand you will be able to follow in his bed sheets. Liger-Belair is the young associate professor who burst the bubble on nucleation theory, and his book is the story behind his discovery.