Champagne shootout - 95 v 96

4 Nov 2004 by JR

Racial stereotyping can give a wicked amount of pleasure, especially when a morning's tasting of some of the finest champagnes in the world is in prospect. So in the Castel Jeanson hotel in Ay I much enjoyed watching the Belgian wine writer invited to Champagne to compare the last two great vintages tuck in to a particularly substantial breakfast washed down, as he insists he does before every serious tasting, with CocaCola. His young German counterpart was immaculately suited. The young Spaniard was very much not but looked as though he had walked straight out of an El Greco. The Dutchman told me proudly he had already published a photograph of last night's welcome dinner on his website, and the poor Italian had a cold and no adaptor for his laptop.

We had been convened, one wine writer from each major European market, by the CIVC, the efficient and much-needed keeper of the peace between Champagne's growers and bottlers, to compare the merits and characteristics of the 1995 and 1996 vintage champagnes. Such a glorious pair of champagne vintages does not come along often, and very rarely consecutively. But they are very different and even within the champagne business, perhaps particularly within the champagne business, there is much disagreement about their relative merits.

The 1995 growing season was regarded as classic, helped by a very successful flowering and hindered by the threat of mildew, and eventually yielding particularly ripe grapes. Average alcohol and total acidity levels were 9.5 per cent and 9 grams per litre respectively. The next year 1996 on the other hand was exceptional in all sorts of ways. Flowering and ripening followed a stop-start pattern, the ripening of the Chardonnay grapes was particularly uneven, but the vital statistics in the end reached levels not seen since the famous 1928 vintage: average alcohol of nearly 10 per cent and average acidity of 10 g/l. So unusual was it to have the combination of such ripe grapes with such high acidity that many winemakers were flummoxed. They had never experienced musts like these and were not quite sure how to treat them. Excessive ripeness is not necessarily a boon for making for top quality sparkling wine (the final alcohol level of the wine is always higher because of the second fermentation in bottle).

Claude Giraud of Ay who is transforming Henri Giraud into a serious champagne house is firmly pro-1995 which he sees as deliciously voluptuous. For him the acidity was just too high in 1996, although he admits that his own 1996 is starting to soften a bit. "Do you know," he told me shaking his head at such folly, "some winemakers didn't do the [second, softening] malolactic fermentation in '96!" Pascal Agrapart of Avize admits that the grapes in 1996 had to be picked very, very ripe. If this was achieved then it was a vintage that was good at expressing particular terroirs (an unusual but increasingly popular concept in Champagne). Laurent Champs of the excellent family house Vilmart on the other hand told me he did not like 1995 at first because it was so closed and inexpressive, and he talked up his 1996 to such an extent that he has hardly a bottle left in the cellar. Nicole Moncuit of Pierre Moncuit has the most lyrical description of the differing characters of the two years: "1995 is warm and sunny, the fireworks of sunshine, whereas 1996 is more like a smouldering volcano – it is just starting to open and speak to us".

To test the two vintages the CIVC arraigned a total of 58 wines, all served blind, in their new bright white tasting lab, encompassing a politically correct range of wines from big houses, small growers and co-operatives. It would probably have been a more revealing experiment had the wines been completely jumbled up. As it was we were told before we started tasting that flights of alternate vintages would be served.

The acidity in the first flight immediately marked it as 1996 so from then on we knew exactly which vintage we were tasting although we had no idea which wines were included. The first two flights alone were enough to demonstrate

these two vintages' hugely different personalities. The 1996s were much more youthful (particularly the Blancs de Blancs), concentrated, savoury and more mineral; the 1995s were markedly more developed than the 1996s (seeming much more than a year older), sweeter, gentler, rounder and in some cases more floral. If they had been horses, the 1996 was all tense and champing at the bit in the stables while the 1995 had been put out to grass and was in some cases almost over the hill.

Overall there were some magnificent wines here. The CIVC perhaps thought that if we were all to trek to Epernay, they should make it worth our while. Not surprisingly, wines such as Dom Pérignon, Perrier Jouët's Belle Epoque and Louis Roederer's Cristal showed well in both vintages, but then so too did less glamorous (and generally much less expensive) bottlings such as Billecart Salmon's Blanc de Blancs and the regular vintage champagnes from Bruno Paillard, Laurent Perrier, Piper Heidsieck, Pommery, Pol Roger and the much less famous names E Barnault, Marie-Noelle Ledru Grand Cru and Arnould Michel & Fils, Cuvée Carte d'Or.

When I totted up my marks out of 20 I found that my average mark for the 1996s was 17.2, quite substantially ahead of my 16.5 average for 1995. And there was no shortage of instances in which the 1996 seemed notably better than the 1995 vintage of the same wine: Agrapart's special Avizoise bottling for a start, Bollinger, Drappier's Grande Sendrée bottling, the Chouilly co-operative's Nicolas Feuillatte, Palmes d'Or cuvée, Moët & Chandon (whose 1996 was really very impressive) and Taittinger. (Tasting champagne blind is especially useful since prejudicial views of those precious images are impossible.)

There were far fewer instances in which the 1995 tasted distinctly superior to the 1996 vintage to me although I preferred the 1995 St Gall, Cuvée Orpale from Union Champagne, the Avize co-operative that supplies so much wine to UK retailers such as Tesco and Marks & Spencer (which sells this particular wine for £30) for their own labels. In the blind tasting I also preferred the Pierre Moncuit, Cuvée Millésimée Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs 1995 to the 1996 (Nicole's fireworks to her volcano).

The tasting was conducted at an unparalleled speed. I am a relatively fast taster but had to wrestle my glass of wine number six from the CIVC staff so as to have enough time to write about it. This, I learnt later, was in order to reach the Royal Champagne restaurant in time for our four-course lunch. My CIVC programme had lunch posted for 12.30 and my first visit of the afternoon for 16.00. Stereotypically French, I would say.

My favourite wines

Dom Pérignon 1996

Dom Pérignon 1995

Moët & Chandon 1996

Piper Heidsieck 1995

Piper Heidsieck 1996

Agrapart et Fils, L'Avizoise 1996

Perrier Jouët, Belle Epoque 1996

Pommery 1996

Taittinger 1996

Pommery 1995

Arnould Michel & Fils, Cuvée Carte d'Or 1996

Marie-Noelle Ledru Grand Cru 1995