Fizz and fortified - more information please!

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Among the 70,000 tasting notes on our Purple Pages are more than 1,500 on wines that carry no vintage date. In a way I'm rather ashamed of these. About half of them are about non-vintage champagnes and some date back to 2005. But the wine sold today as Brand X NV Champagne will be very different from the blend being sold as Brand X NV Champagne back then, rendering my older tasting notes rather useless.

Producers of champagne, and most sparkling wines, make a new blend every year. They surely owe it to us to tell us exactly what it is they are trying to sell us, or what it is we are drinking.

It was all very well selling fizz blandly labelled with no more useful identification than the brand name in the old days. But today's consumer, and certainly commentator, is much thirstier for information. Just look at all the books and websites devoted to the minutiae of each of the hundreds of thousands of different wines bottled each year. As with the food we eat, wine drinkers today want to know exactly what it is they are drinking - especially when we are being asked to pay double- and sometimes triple-digit prices for a bottle of it.

In the old days it was enough for a champagne producer to say that their great virtue was consistency and that, no matter what the vintage conditions, their non-vintage blend would always taste (strike out the words that do not apply) vivacious/majestic/delicate/elegant/sophisticated/sumptuous, etc, etc. But now that the world's climate seems to be suffering an existential crisis and our media are full of reports of heatwave summers, unprecedented flooding, exceptional frosts and so on, it is stretching credulity to expect us to believe that a wine as transparent as champagne or one of its peers will not be affected by the particular conditions shaping the major ingredient in each year's new blend or cuvée.

Besides, those of us with a keen interest in champagne are increasingly exposed to growers' champagnes in which consistency is rarely touted as a virtue. Instead, pride is taken in expressing variation in different terroirs, grape varieties and vintage conditions - and these differences tend to be positively relished by those who drink them.

For years - ever since I wrote a column in *Wine Spectator,* which was a *very* long time ago - I have been urging champagne producers in particular to provide more information on their back labels about the age of the wines in the bottle and the disgorgement date, how long the wine sat on its lees in bottle, and also therefore how long it has been in commercial circulation. This is not just to satisfy the cravings of knowledge-hungry wine nerds like me. It makes commercial sense to give your importers, retailers and the sommeliers who pour your wines as much helpful information as possible. It would be genuinely useful to know which bottle to pull first out of a collection of them that were delivered at different times.

I wouldn't say that the champagne producers have taken up my challenge in droves. Most champagne sales people can interpret the tiny lot numbers printed on individual bottles but they are far too arcane for general consumption. Bollinger long ago led the way, and Bruno Paillard has always been much more explicit on his labels than most of the grandes marques (see also Does disgorgement date matter? for an account of a tasting of five examples of his Première Cuvée with different disgorgement dates). But otherwise it tends to be the growers and the smaller houses that have been most generous with information. Perhaps my colleague Antonio Galloni, responsible for reviewing champagne for Robert Parker's *Wine Advocate*, will be more successful at effecting change. He has written that he will simply refuse to review a champagne for which no years or dates are supplied.

It is interesting to note that those who produce the most expensive 'multi-vintage' (the posh way of saying non-vintage) champagne of all, Krug, have recently acknowledged the need to divulge more information - not least because they now acknowledge that there is considerable variation in style between different blends of Krug Grande Cuvée. It is famously made up of as many as 120 different ingredients. In the Krug cellars are reserve wines dating back to 1988 and the average age of their blend is often so venerable that they claim that Krug Grande Cuvée is usually older on average than most vintage champagnes on the market (see Eight (surprising) Krugs for breakfast).

They know how to charge for this luxury, so it is quite right that, under the aegis of Krug's dynamic new president Margareth Henriquez, they also see the need to communicate the details behind it to their customers (many of whom genuinely feel they have a personal relationship with the rather special brand that is Krug). Accordingly, in June 2011 they

introduced ID codes on the back labels of Krug Grand Cuvée which can be translated via their website www.krug.com into details of the (very approximate) date of disgorgement, how long it spent on the lees, how many different wines went into the blend and how old the oldest vintage was.

This is admirable even if incomplete and really rather fiddly. One thing you can tell immediately from this six-digit numerical ID code, however, is the year of disgorgement, represented by the first two digits. So all wines disgorged in 2011, for example, have a code that begins 11. There is a lot of information to communicate so I can see that not all back labels can accommodate everything the wine lover might want to know. Surely champagne back labels would be the ideal home for those black and white Aztec-looking square patterns known as QR codes (see above left)? Just point your mobile phone, the appliance that is fast replacing our personal computers, at the QR code to be granted all the background information you could possibly want.

So, that's the champagne/sparkling wine information problem sorted (except of course that those who produce the cheapest wines with the youngest ingredients and shortest possible ageing will be strangely coy about providing background information - perhaps a telling indication in itself once my system has been widely adopted). Now let's move on to all the other sorts of wine that are sold with neither vintage nor bottling information on the label. Yes, fortified winemakers, I mean you!

Bravo to the likes of Barbeito, who faithfully identify each individual cask of Madeira they bottle - because on the island of Madeira, the same wine bottled a few years apart can taste extremely dissimilar. Bravo to the trend towards vintage-dated sherries. And yes, I do like indications of age too such as VOS (at least 20 years old) and VORS (at least 30) and X year old tawny ports and madeiras - though the icing on the cake would be to be told when each lot was bottled, please.