Vintage years are important in wine lore. They tend to acquire their reputations early on and are usually stuck with them for the rest of their active lives. The 2001 vintage of red bordeaux, particularly on the right bank, has arguably gained in stature over time, as did the 1993 vintage of red burgundy, but these are exceptions.

In Champagne the 1996 vintage was hailed early on as exceptional, exceptionally good, not least because the grapes notched up record levels of both ripeness and acidity. At a recent showing of his excellent NPU prestige bottling, champagne producer Bruno Paillard called the 1996 vintage a ‘naughty boy’ because it was so changeable and such a cliff-hanger for producers as they waited for acid levels to fall to palatable levels, ‘but the result is fantastic for
those who have the patience to wait'. This demanding vintage followed the hot summer of 1995, whose earlier-maturing wines were initially regarded as inferior to the dramatic 1996s.

But today there is considerable revisionism about the reputation of the 1996s. Many champagne drinkers and champagne producers nowadays are expressing doubts about how well the 1996 champagnes have aged. In some cases, the acidity, rather than tactfully receding into the background to allow mature fruit and complex, tertiary aromas to blossom, continues to hog the limelight while the fruit seems already to be losing its power. This is particularly true of regular 1996 vintage champagne from less starry producers. The downgrading of 1996 often goes hand in hand with an approving reappraisal of the 1995s. Some 1995 champagnes that have particularly impressed me recently were the P2 late releases of Dom Pérignon both white and pink, Bruno Paillard’s NPU and Charles Heidsieck's Blanc de Millénaires.

It may be worth noting that the only time I have ever been invited to a generic tasting in Champagne by the interprofessional body, the CIVC, was in 2002 when they asked a group of us wine writers from all over Europe to participate in a blind comparison of wines from the 1995 and 1996 vintages. My conclusion at the time was a starry-eyed, 'on average I have awarded the same overall score to 1995s as to 1996s (3.3 stars), but when you consider that most of the famous names are still on vintage 1995 or older, and that a high proportion of the 1996s [we tasted] are from lesser-known producers, I think the vintage's intrinsic worth shines through'.

Twenty years is quite an age for a champagne, even a vintage-dated one that is generally based on the finest base wines available, but the high acidity of the 1996s should, at least in theory, be enough to keep the best of them soldiering on into their third decade.

The fine wine trader BI (known as Bordeaux Index before diversifying into pastures new, notably top-quality champagne) tends to hold an annual tasting of 10-year-old champagnes. At this year's event were eight 2006 prestige champagnes plus a Krug Grande Cuvée based on the 2006 vintage. But in honour of BI's twentieth anniversary, this year these were supplemented by a dozen 1996 champagnes, including virtually all the most glamorous.

Having tasted these 1996s – admittedly some of them extremely expensive – supplemented by a few others tasted recently, it seems to me that you have to head for the crème de le crème of Champagne to be guaranteed a really outstanding 1996, and that yes, there are indeed disappointments to be found. Two bottles of Gosset Grand Millésime 1996 and a magnum of Lanson Gold Label 1996 were just a bit too tart for comfort.

And the weekend before last at a private dinner, for instance, I tasted two bottles of Bollinger Grande Année 1996 from the same case. The first was served blind and I guessed it was at least 10 years older, probably more. It was barely fizzy and had a severe shortage of fruit - the common fault in 1996s that have not aged gracefully. But a second bottle was much, much fresher and zestier, even though it still finished a little dry. My tasting note ended 'better than some of the most austere 1996s but not glorious'. (This sort of bottle variation is, alas, all too common in wines both still and sparkling. The reason could be a difference in cork quality, or in how each bottle was stored before being packed in the case.)

On the other hand, BI's tasting included a magnum of Bollinger 1996 disgorged (separated from the sediment of the second fermentation in bottle) much more recently than these standard-release Bollinger 1996s would have been disgorged. This Bollinger RD 1996, RD standing for recently disgorged, was not disgorged until September 2013 and is sold at a premium (£540 a magnum in bond from BI). This was a much more intense and glorious wine whose density
seemed better able to compensate for all that acidity than the earlier-disgorged examples.

The finest 1996 champagne of all in the BI tasting was from a (very rare) magnum of Roederer Cristal. This was a very particular pleasure to taste because, thanks to worldwide demand for Cristal, it is so unusual to come across examples of this luxurious wine with much bottle age on it - and even rarer to find it from the supposedly optimum magnum size. But I swear it was not just the rarity that was so exciting, but also the extraordinary range of aromas of gingerbread, baked apples and a positively electric sort of energy in this youthful wine. You would never guess from either the taste or the look of this wine that it was 20 years old.

When I first tasted this wine at the end of 2002, presumably soon after it was released, it was really not very communicative at all and didn't start to show what it was capable of for another eight years or so. I see that when I tasted it, again from magnum, in 2007 I observed, 'this should make spectacular old bones – if it's allowed to'. Cristal really does repay patience even if it is hardly ever given it.

The wines described here include virtually all of the world's most luxurious champagnes and this may not seem the most appropriate time to be concentrating on them. Consider this account a displacement activity.

1996 CHAMPAGNES WORTH WAITING FOR
These are the 1996 champagnes I have recently given a score of at least 18.5 out 20 (although several also scored 18) with the prices quoted by BI as a guide, although they have probably already sold out of many of these rarities.

Bollinger, RD Extra Brut 1996
£540 a magnum in bond from BI

Dom Pérignon, P2 1996
£320 a bottle from www.millesima.co.uk

Philipponnat, Clos des Goisses 1996
£285 a bottle in bond from BI

Louis Roederer, Cristal 1996
£800 a magnum in bond from BI

Salon, Blanc de Blancs 1996
£1,900 a bottle in bond from BI