



Written by
Jancis Robinson
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NB the NV revolution



A shorter version of this article is published by the Financial Times. See [associated tasting notes](#). I took the picture of the fountain urging us never to drink water in the yard at Laurent-Perrier.

It is extraordinary how much champagne has changed in the last 10 years or so.

It really wasn't very long ago that the emblematic image of champagne making was a man in a blue smock twiddling a couple of upended bottles in a wooden riddling rack – all in the cause of shaking into the necks the sediment from the second fermentation in bottle responsible for the carbon dioxide and much of the flavour.

Today there are fewer than 10 professional hand-riddlers, or *remueurs*, in the region. Only Pol Roger and Bollinger rely on them to any extent. Most of these potential human sacrifices to RSI

have been replaced by large metal crates that automatically and identically shake hundreds of bottles at a time.

And it's not just the cellars that are seeing the advent of machines. Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon, Louis Roederer's hyperactive winemaker, is president of Champagne's technical committee. He has instituted a 10-year study of how mechanical harvesters might be adapted to pick grapes for champagne because, as he puts it, 'in five years' time we won't have any tractor drivers'.

But it's mainly in how champagne is presented to its customers that there have been the greatest changes. It was the case until quite recently that the Champenois liked to play the game that there was no need to provide much information about their wine - particularly with regard to the non-vintage blends that constitute the vast majority of all champagne produced.

Although the blends are made at the beginning of each year, based substantially on the produce of the previous autumn that varies considerably from year to year, the Champenois used to claim that it always tasted the same. Thus, there was no need to tell us the age of a bottle of NV champagne, nor what went into it. As a corollary of this, there seemed no point in us wine writers reviewing NV champagne because it all tasted the same - or if it didn't, there was no way consumers could tell the difference between different blends, or cuvées, anyway.

Nowadays things are very different. A wealth of information is to be found on the back label of many a non-vintage blend, with the more quality-conscious growers (as opposed to the big houses) in particular practically citing the colour of the winemaker's socks. Arguably the most useful fact is either the year that constitutes the majority of the blend or the year of bottling (customarily the next one).

Many other producers also give the year, month or even date of disgorgement, the day that sediment was expelled from the bottle (by freezing upended bottlenecks) and topped up with the so-called liqueur de dosage, the traditional blend of wine and sugar, before being stoppered with its final champagne cork and muzzle.

Some producers also spell out the proportions of the three champagne grapes - Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier - in the blend and possibly even where they came from or what proportion of wine came from grand cru or premier cru villages.

Others, such as top-of-the-tree Krug and Roederer, give QR or other codes that can be interpreted down to the last detail via apps and websites. (The most public faces of these two houses, Olivier Krug and Lécaillon respectively, classmates who holiday together, vie with each other for social-media activity.)

It was Krug, whose blend of different vintages is usually classified as a prestige rather than a non-vintage champagne, who announced most publicly - back in 2011 in Hong Kong as they were launching their ID codes - that consistency from year to year was not the name of the game.

Several recent tastings illustrated to me just how varied non-vintage champagne is from year to year. Lanson's NV is known as Black Label and has until recently been notably high in acidity in its youth. The relatively new winemaker Hervé Dantan is now deliberately trying to make Black Label blends a little more approachable by breaking with tradition and allowing a certain proportion of the wine to go through the softening malolactic conversion. A tasting of Black Label based on the 2013 harvest and then counterparts based on years ending with a 9, back to 1959, was a revelation.

Believe it or not, the blend based on 1959 was still delicious – still blooming with not a trace of decay. The one exactly 10 years younger already tasted like sauerkraut and seemed well over the hill to me. The one based on 1979 was still alive and a bit vegy but not that interesting, while that based on 1989 was fully mature if a bit sweet and sickly. The 1999-based one also tasted as though it was a little too sweet (at one stage there was a tendency to try to compensate for the high acid with a heavy dosage) while the 2009-based blend was tart and not that interesting at this point in its evolution. For the record, Dantan's first blend, based on 2013, was a triumph of balance, energy and approachability.

But Lanson with its traditional no-malo policy is a little unusual. Arguably more mainstream was the run of blends based on 2013, 2012, 2008 and 2007 for Brut Premier, Louis Roederer's non-vintage cuvée. The proportion of these blends put through malolactic conversion varied from 27 to 56% according to the very varied character of each growing season. The years were so different, it is hardly surprising that each wine had its own personality. As Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon put it, 'what we aim for is consistency of idea – finesse and balance – not consistency of taste'.

Two major general trends among Champagne's chefs de cave are to make their wines less aggressively fizzy and to reduce the dosage of the champagnes they are responsible for. This is partly because hotter summers have resulted in lower levels of acidity in grape musts, so there is less need to compensate by adding sugar to the final wine. And it also reflects fashion.

We are seeing more and more champagnes labelled Extra Brut (dosage less than 6 g/l) or Brut Nature or Zero Dosage (less than 3 g/l), particularly in the wines produced by the more trend-conscious growers. Some of these can be awfully austere, especially if the wine is young, and specialist writer Tom Stevenson argues that dosage up to the legal maximum of 12 g/l for a wine labelled Brut is necessary for a champagne to age gracefully. (The norm nowadays tends to be about 8 or 9 g/l.)

But Lécaillon (again) has proved with Roederer Brut Nature 2009 that, from a warm year (and in this case a very special vineyard), dosage is no longer absolutely necessary for high-quality champagne. But informing those prepared to pay for it surely is.

SOME FAVOURITE CURRENT CHAMPAGNES

Prices are the ex tax average global price per bottle quoted by wine-searcher.com.

Lanson, Black Label NV (current release, based on 2013) £31

Louis Roederer, Brut Premier NV (current release, based on 2013) £37

Moët & Chandon 2009 £38

Charles Heidsieck, Brut Réserve NV (to be released end 2017, based on 2010) current release is £41

Billecart Salmon 2007 £54

Pol Roger 2008 £55

Louis Roederer, Brut Nature 2009 £62

Bollinger, Grande Année 2007 £77

Laurent-Perrier, Grand Siècle (current release, based on 1999, 1997 and 1996) £111

Charles Heidsieck, Blanc des Millénaires 1995 £118

Krug, Grande Cuvée 164th Edition £122

For stockists see wine-searcher.com. For my tasting notes see [A tour of nine major champagne houses](#).

