

# Champagne

Tom Stevenson

For a test period of five years, the maximum yield per hectare in Champagne will rise from 13,000 kg to 15,500 kg, or 98.8 hl, which is 8.8 hl above the limit at which producers of the lowliest *vins de table* can push their production before their wrists are smacked.



TOM STEVENSON

Sounds scarily high, doesn't it? But it gets worse. Or better, if you're a *champenois*. Hidden in the small print under what can only be described as an ironic heading – "Double-safeguard to prevent excessive yields" – growers must ensure that no block of vines exceeds 18 bunches per square metre and, however low the average yield for their entire viticultural holdings might be, no individual parcel of vines may exceed an average yield of 21,700 kg/ha (138 hl/ha).

Of course they cannot make wines from the officially sanctioned but non-usable 6,200 kg between 15,500 kg and 21,700 kg. However, if a grower's crop hits 21,700 kg/ha, there is no qualitative difference between grapes harvested up to 15,500 kg and those grapes harvested

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above this imaginary limit. When will the French understand that juggling the numbers does not equate with restricting yields? It is merely rationing what percentage of the yield that may be used and then chucking the rest away. This has no qualitative effect whatsoever. With demand seemingly insatiable, they might as well come clean and use the lot. There is no logic to rationing the amount of the crop that may be used, especially in today's market, when demand outstrips supply and there is a call to expand the appellation. Rationing merely puts pressure on stocks, which unnecessarily drives up the cost of grapes, resulting in an artificial inflation of the price of a bottle of champagne. This is precisely the sort of scenario that could spell disaster for the current boom in sales.

Sales of champagne are notoriously cyclical, going from boom to bust and back to boom again. Champagne's next bust is overdue. In theory, it should have happened by now, having been triggered by a series of economic, social, and climatic catastrophes that have blighted the first few years of the 21st century. In terms of the magnitude, the factors affecting the 21st century are off the boom–bust Richter scale compared to the events that precipitated the busts of the 20th century – so much so, that the first two questions I am asked whenever I visit Champagne are how long I think the current boom will last, and what might trigger a slow-down in sales?

So, what has saved champagne from nose-diving into its biggest crash yet? The millennium effect, that's what. The millennium effect was built on a hope that never materialized following 9/11, which only adds to the mystery of why the boom has gone from strength to strength under such unstable global conditions. More hope, perhaps? Whatever the uncertain reasons for the continuing boom may be, we now have what appears on the surface to be a very buoyant champagne market, but underneath it must be very fragile indeed. What is certain, however, is that there is a price level at which sales will suddenly drop off for any product, and the current strategy of artificially rationing supply when demand is so high has set champagne on a collision course that will determine precisely what that price level will be. This threatens to end the boom with an almighty crash; and since the bust that will follow is likely to last as long as the boom that preceded it, it is going to be a very long time before the champagne producers have their next profitable year.

In the long term, Champagne must reduce yields, not increase them, but in the here and now, using what is grown (rather than just a fraction of it) is the only policy that makes sense. Especially in a growing market where

the houses that drive the economy have difficulty obtaining sufficient grapes to keep pace with their sales. By law, the growers have to harvest the entire crop and deliver any excess to the distillery by 31 December of the year of harvest (although this has been enforced only since 2004), so why not renegotiate with the growers to use all the grapes but at a significantly lower price per kilo? The growers would receive less per kilo but would be much richer by selling up to 40 per cent more grapes; houses would be free to increase sales without depleting stocks or reducing quality; and champagne would not hit the price level at which sales would drop off. Seems like a win-win situation for everybody.

### Distilling the truth?

In 2004, when the imaginary maximum was set at 13,000 kg/ha, Champagne averaged a whopping 23,000 kg/ha (146.5 hl/ha), and the wine was – believe me – very good. There are those in Champagne who point to 2004 and other high-quality bumper years as proof that the largest crops produce the best champagne, thereby dismissing critics' concerns over increasing yields. However, they got away with it in 2004 only because the weather just before and during the harvest was unseasonably good. Had they experienced average weather conditions, the quality would have been at least as bad as in 2001. Furthermore, had the weather been a repeat of that experienced in 2001 (when the yield was "only" 18,000 kg), 2004 would have been the worst vintage on record. That is why it was so irresponsible to increase the maximum yield to 15,500 kg. It's like telling the worst offenders that they should grow more, and you can bet they will.

What really makes a mockery of Champagne's new yield is its toothless declaration that any parcel of vines exceeding the 21,700 kg/ha "double-safeguard" will lose its right to the appellation. Really? I sincerely doubt it. When I voiced this opinion to one very influential member of the champagne industry, he told me, "Oh yes, it will. We are very serious about punishing those who are responsible for excessive yields." But when I asked, "If Champagne had another 2004 vintage – a year in which the whole region averaged well in excess of 21,700 kg/ha – would they really distil an entire crop of good-quality champagne?", the only response was an enigmatic smile. Why do the French persist in burdening their wine industry with rules they cannot police and threatening penalties they will not invoke?

# Opinion:

## Conflicting strategies

The cause of Champagne's cyclical boom–bust economy, and the root of most of Champagne's problems, is the imbalance in vineyard ownership (see *Wine Report 2005*, p.34). The industry leaders try to make out that the houses and growers enjoy the happiest of marriages, but their actions speak louder than words. They say they are genuinely concerned about growers and cooperatives holding back the grapes and *vins clairs* the houses need to fuel the organic growth in their sales, yet we see champagnes sold at prices as low as £7.49 a bottle at Christmas in the UK. That's not organic – that's buying market share. When suffering from a short supply of grapes and faced with an unprecedented level of demand, those houses that sell champagne so cheaply are foolish. When it is the cooperatives that are responsible for such dirt-cheap champagne under these conditions, they are cynically and unfairly buying market share. Both are hypocrites.

### Grapevine

- **Krug has released** the stunning 1985 in bottles and (my personal idea of heaven) the even more stunning 1995 and 1981, and they're in magnums, too. These are part of the Krug Collection and are not held on their yeasts for later disgorgement. Or not necessarily. Sometimes they come across a forgotten pile still on its first cork, but they are supposed to be the quintessential expression of normally disgorged Krug entering its second life and full of wonderfully rich, mellow, and mature post-disgorgement complexity.

- **English-born MW Stephen Charters** has been appointed the first ever Professor of Champagne Management at the Reims Management School on a cool €250,000 per year.

- **The Taittinger family** has bought back 37 per cent of its "own" firm, following the takeover of the entire Groupe Taittinger by American

investment-fund specialists Starwood Capital in 2005 and the subsequent repurchase by Crédit Agricole du Nord-Est in conjunction with the Taittinger family. The bank now holds just 20 per cent of the company, with the remaining 43 per cent taken up by "friendly parties".

- **Ghislain Montgolfier** has been appointed president of the Union des Maisons de Champagne and, therefore, one of the joint presidents of CIVC. Montgolfier, who has been *président directeur général* of Bollinger since 1994, replaces Yves Bénéard, who has taken the top job at INAO.

- **Hervé Jestin**, former *chef de caves* at Duval-Leroy, has set up Jestin Oenology at 58 rue de Vignolles in Epernay. This consultancy firm already has customers in Champagne, Bordeaux, Italy, and even Russia. His current areas of research include working without sulphur and trying to decrease copper usage in vineyards.

# Vintage Report

Advance report on the latest harvest

## 2006

Definitely a "Chardonnay vintage", with some excellent base wines produced on the Côte des Blancs, but the Pinot Noir suffered more rot than producers were inclined to admit, and the Meunier was even worse. With nearly 16 per cent affected, the normally hardy Meunier was exceptionally rot-prone for the second year running. This does not mean that some fine-quality champagnes won't be produced from black grapes, just that selection will very much be the key. The Aube produced the most interesting Pinot Noir, although some grapes were overripe.

Updates on the previous five vintages

## 2005

**Vintage rating: 85**

With about 14 per cent grey rot in the black varieties, particularly Meunier, 2005 cannot be classified as a true or great vintage. Definitely not in the class of 2002; probably just below 2004, although some producers may make better 2005s. This is a winemaker's year. Jean-Baptiste Lecaillon, the *chef de caves* at Roederer, told me: "If you are a good blender, one plus one can often equal three, but in 2005 one plus one equals four!" From tasting the *vins clairs*, I found Chardonnay overwhelmingly the best variety, with Le Mesnil-sur-Oger its most successful *cru*. As far as black varieties are concerned, Pinot Noir has the edge, with Verzy and Verzenay standing out.

## 2004

**Vintage rating: 85–88**

This is a vintage on steroids: huge and boosted by an injection of exceptional sunshine. The quality is good to very good, with excellent acids and purity.

### Grapevine

- **Béatrice Cointreau** has been relieved of her position as head of Gosset (and Frapin cognac) to "pursue other interests". What other interests? Gosset and Frapin were her

life, and she dramatically increased sales of both at the top end. For another view of why she left, go to [www.cognac-world.com/article.php3?id\\_article=3135](http://www.cognac-world.com/article.php3?id_article=3135).

**2003****Vintage rating:** 50–90

Frost destroyed 50 per cent of the potential crop, then a pan-European heat wave ripened the grapes at an extraordinarily fast rate, resulting in the earliest harvest since 1822 (when records began), with high, but not excessively high, natural alcohol levels (an average of 10.6 per cent ABV). The speed at which the grapes went through *véraison* produced the lowest acidity and highest pH on record. It is therefore not another 1976, 1959, or 1947, as some *chamenois* would have us believe. 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. The best 2003s released so far have been 2003 by Bollinger (see No. 1 Most Exciting or Unusual Finds, p.36) and JM Gobillard Cuvée de Prestige.

**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. Many of the earliest 2002s to appear on the shelf have been disappointing, but the best are years away from release. The best 2002s so far released have mostly been *blanc de blancs*: Champagne Legras & Haas Grand Cru, De Saint Gall 1er Cru, and Jacquart Mosaïque, with Taittinger the only blend to stand out.

**2001****Vintage rating:** 35

Dilute, insipid, and unripe. Anyone who declares this vintage needs his head testing. The best of the exceptions is Clos des Goisses. Agrapart's Venus Blanc de Blancs Brut Nature is the next-best 2001 I have tasted so far, but unless a producer is trying to make a point about an exceptional *terroir*, such as Clos des Goisses does, why would anyone want to put this vintage on the label?

**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 Moët & Chandon
- 2 Vilmart
- 3 Mumm
- 4 Pommery
- 5 Mailly Grand Cru
- 6 Jean Moutardier
- 7 Comte Audoin de Dampierre
- 8 Pannier
- 9 Vve Devaux
- 10 J Dumangin

**NEW UP-AND-COMING PRODUCERS**

- 1 Serge Mathieu
- 2 Henri Mandois
- 3 Fluteau
- 4 Bruno Paillard
- 5 Chanoine's Tsarine range
- 6 Henri Giraud
- 7 Audoin de Dampierre
- 8 Jean Moutardier

**BEST-VALUE PRODUCERS**

- 1 Charles Heidsieck
- 2 Serge Mathieu
- 3 Henri Mandois
- 4 Jean Moutardier
- 5 Alfred Gratien
- 6 Bruno Paillard
- 7 Lanson
- 8 Louis Roederer
- 9 Drappier
- 10 Piper-Heidsieck

**Grapevine**

• **Dominique Demarville takes a lower post.** Recognized as the inspirational force that reversed the downward trend in Mumm's quality, Demarville was promoted to director of wines and vines for both Mumm and Perrier Jouët in 2003. In December 2006, however, he left this highly prestigious position to serve as number two to Jacques Peters in Veuve Clicquot's winemaking team. Why? Demarville told me several years ago that Peters was his winemaking idol, so when head-hunted by Veuve Clicquot to take over from Peters in three years, the opportunity to study under him was not only his personal dream come true, but also a once-in-a-lifetime, never-to-be-repeated offer he could not refuse. What a wise and humble head on such young shoulders.

• **The incidence** of TCA-affected champagne appears to be at an all-time low. I kept a tally at both my own annual champagne tasting and the DWWA, and the number of TCA-affected bottles averaged 2.8 per cent over 540 samples (with only two in the first 319 samples!).

• **Rémy Cointreau** has again denied rumours that it is selling off its champagne business, but one should never say never. With shares at an all-time high at the beginning of 2007, and having restructured its business to concentrate on its two famous brands, together with the notice it gave Maxxium to end its distribution contract in March 2009, Charles Heidsieck and Piper-Heidsieck will, at that juncture, be at their most attractive ever for potential buyers.

## GREATEST-QUALITY WINES

- 1 **Cuvée Prestige Blanc de Blancs 1996** Comte Audoin de Dampierre (€85)
- 2 **Cuvée Orpale Grand Cru 1996** De Saint Gall (€70)
- 3 **Clos des Goisses 1997** Philipponnat (€80)
- 4 **Cuvée William Deutz 1998** Deutz (€90)
- 5 **Blanc de Millénares 1995** Charles Heidsieck (€60)
- 6 **Cuvée R Lalou 1998** Mumm (€120)
- 7 **Vintage Rosé 2002** Deutz (€35)
- 8 **2003 by Bollinger** (€65)
- 9 **Dom Ruinart Rosé 1996** Ruinart (€145)
- 10 **Millésime Brut 1999** Boizel (€28.90)

## BEST BARGAINS

- 1 **2003 by Bollinger** (€65)
- 2 **Cuvée Millésime 1998** Jean Moutardier (€23)
- 3 **Blanc de Blancs Fleuron 2002** Pierre Gimonet (€26)
- 4 **Grand Vintage 2000** Moët & Chandon (€35)
- 5 **Brut Réserve Mise en Cave 2003 NV** Charles Heidsieck (€29.50)
- 6 **Cuvée des Ambassadeurs 1er Cru NV** Comte Audoin de Dampierre (€25)
- 7 **Brut Croix Rouge NV** Champagne de Castellane (€16)
- 8 **Blanc de Blancs Cuvée Prestige NV** André Jacquart (€25)
- 9 **Vintage 2000** Pannier (€25)
- 10 **Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru 2002** Legras & Haas (€20)

## MOST EXCITING OR UNUSUAL FINDS

- 1 **2003 by Bollinger** (€65) *A one-off, released three years before Bollinger is due to release its Grande Année 2000, let alone its Grande Année 2002. Just one-tenth the volume of their normal vintage production, from only three villages (Ay, Verzenay, and Cuis – the historical heart of Bollinger's vineyards), this is a sumptuous champagne (genuinely dry), with the softest, silkiest mousse.*
- 2 **Grand Vintage 2000** Moët & Chandon (€35) *The largest-selling champagne brand starts to get serious with its 2000 vintage. It has not simply turned over a new leaf in the way it makes vintage champagne, it has ripped out all the pages and thrown the book away. This is only the beginning.*
- 3 **Celebris Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut NV** Gosset (€150) *The first blanc de blancs Celebris would have been even better with a full brut dosage, but a wonderful nugget of rich, mature, walnutty Chardonnay fruit gives it instant class.*
- 4 **RD 1996** Bollinger (€125) *I usually recommend readers to buy the very first shipment of Grande Année and cellar it themselves, since the RD is usually much too raw and needs post-disgorgement ageing anyway. However, the 1996 is the stunning exception to the rule. It's so powerful, with heaps of dry extract and high acids, that the barrique character is almost subsumed.*
- 5 **Cuvée Millésime 1998** Jean Moutardier (€23) *The exceptional fruitiness in this vintage demonstrates the revolutionary pressing quality of Coquard's PAI super-press in its inaugural year.*

- 6 **Quattor Blanc de Quatre Blancs NV** Drappier (€25) *A blend of equal parts Arbane, Petit Meslier, Pinot Blanc, and Chardonnay.*
- 7 **Brut Nature Sans Souffre NV** Drappier (€25) *The first non-sulphured champagne to be commercialized, and it's as fresh as a daisy. Hollow mid-palate, and would obviously have been better with a dosage, but perhaps the sugar would be too risky without any sulphur?*
- 8 **Brut 1999** J Dumangin (€21) *The single most improved vintage from any producer.*
- 9 **Cuvée Orpale Grand Cru 1996** De Saint Gall (€70) *You can buy this top-quality champagne in*

*so-called rip-off Britain for just two-thirds the price at M&S.*

- 10 **Dom Pérignon 1999** Moët & Chandon (€99) *I'm sticking this down here to get a message across because DP is being released with insufficient post-disgorgement age. It should have at least 12 months before shipping; I'm assured that it has 9 months, but it regularly tastes like under 4 months. As I demonstrated at my Christie's Champagne Masterclass in 2006, the difference between this cuvée disgorged at 7 months and 30 months is mind-blowing, particularly on the mousse, which goes from being aggressive to silky smooth.*

## Grapevine

• **Tasting the 2003s** ahead of their release, I was predictably disappointed with most of them, but the two best examples, Moët and Bollinger (see No.1 Most Exciting or Unusual Finds, opposite), were truly great wines in their own right. With the lowest acidity and highest pH on record, the knee-jerk reaction of many producers was to add sulphur as early as possible to prevent oxidation, to up the dose of sulphur because of the extraordinarily high pH (up to 3.7!), and to acidify (which is permitted in Champagne). The two most adept at acidification gained their experience in Australia. They are Moët's Richard Geoffroy, who seldom acidifies, and Roederer's Jean-Baptiste Lecaillon, who usually does. There were obvious acidification faults in some of the 2003s, but the most common area of disappointment was the lack of freshness and finesse, which I attribute to heavy-handed sulphuring. When I asked Benoît Gouez, the *chef de caves* at Moët & Chandon, how his 2003 was made,

I discovered that LVMH had been putting a new device through its paces, and this was the secret to their success in 2003. Yeasts consume all available oxygen during the fermentation process, and this particular device, made by Oenodev, measures the amount of oxygen that grape juice ideally requires, which has led them to micro-oxygenating juice, rather than wine, for a smooth fermentation, rather than softening tannins in red wines. When they got the results on the 2003 juice, the decision was made not to add any sulphur at juice stage and just to let it oxidize to an alarming brown colour. This was counterintuitive to those working at the press houses, and as the juice got browner and browner, they kept phoning Moët's oenologists requesting confirmation. They were almost pulling out their hair in despair; but the yeasts did their job during the fermentation, and the result in freshness, mouthfeel, and balance is quite astounding.