

INTRODUCTION

What is Vintage Champagne?

To define “vintage Champagne” as Champagne produced only from grapes grown in one specific vintage year and aged three years from bottling is correct as far as it goes. As a definition, however, it is certainly incomplete (a full copy of the regulations is translated into English in the first appendix). Unlike most other types of wine, vintage-dated Champagne is the exception rather than the rule. At first blush, this may strike the neophyte as odd, since nearly all of the world’s great wines bear a vintage date. The only category with a similar indifference to vintage dating is sherry. As with sherry, the blending process is central to the production technique for Champagne, and there are other categories such as Port and Madeira, where blending across vintages is an accepted practice.

The 2019 newsletter of the Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne (CIVC) concerning 2018 champagne shipments informs us that the categories of “Vintage” and “Prestige Cuvée” together¹ comprise 6.1% of shipments by volume and 17.7% by value. These figures translate to the equivalent of 18.4 million bottles worth € 513.3 million at the cellar door – a significant category by any measure. And while these wines account for 4.2% by volume and 12.8% by value of shipments to other EU member countries, in non-Eurozone markets, they are even more critical. The United States is the most valuable export market for Champagne, and here vintage wines account for 8.4% by volume and 20.5% by value.

In some ways, vintage Champagne runs counter to the essence of Champagne. The art of blending is at the heart of Champagne, which is most often a blend of grapes, a blend of wines from different years, and a blend of fruit from different sub-regions within Champagne. It can be a blend of different

¹ There is no official definition of “prestige cuvée” at the CIVC. Instead, they rely on a self-reported list of what each correspondent feels is their “prestige cuvée.” In reality, most of the cuvées thus reported are vintage also, although there are certainly examples, such as Krug Grande Cuvée and Laurent-Perrier Grande Siècle, which are multi-vintage blends.

winemaking techniques and a blend of wines of different colors. In one sense, however, vintage Champagne is in fact the soul of Champagne since it tries to capture the region's superlatives. Vintage Champagne will always be a snapshot, showing one particular moment in time and one specific winemaker, but these moments can be exhilarating.

The reason for this practice in Champagne is unique and stems from the terroir itself. It is a region of such a northerly location that grapes ripen with difficulty. It is only because of the chalky, water-bearing soils, and the region's well-aligned hillside slopes that grapes can ripen at all. Grapes here seldom reach the minimum alcoholic strength of most other appellations and often retain notably high acidity. Because of the soil and the slopes, however, the resulting wines' fruit character is usually well-developed, even if the potential alcohol remains low and the acidity remains high. The Traditional Method of producing Champagne is a response developed over centuries by the Champagne winemakers to the raw materials that nature provides. Even the method of putting in the bubbles was a response to these characteristics of the terroir. The process of making the wine sparkling (which the French call the "prise de mousse") is essentially a process of enrichment. It is carried out today by adding sugar and yeast (known as liqueur de tirage, or bottling liqueur) to finished wine before bottling. The yeast begins a second fermentation in the bottle, increasing the alcoholic strength of the wine while it adds depth of flavor as well as the characteristic bubbles.

There are other elements of the Traditional Method that are tied to the innate character of the base wines produced in the region. These base wines, quite thin and sharp before the secondary fermentation in the bottle, are often given a bit of sweetening before shipping to balance out the acidity. The agent of this sweetening, either in the form of concentrated, unfermented grape juice or cane sugar, is known as the shipping liqueur (liqueur d'expédition in French) or dosage, another long-standing adaptation of the Traditional Method to the raw materials available in Champagne. Sweetening Champagne with

sugar began in the 17th Century, but the mastery of the bubbles came later. The particular sparkling character of Champagne, however, can only be preserved by the use of bottles (as distinct from bulk storage in cask), and the widespread use of glass bottles for long term storage also dates to the 17th Century. The use of bottles leads to a final element of the method that arose from the same needs: the tradition of blending across vintages to minimize the difficulties posed by a poor vintage. Wines produced in great years would be uncorked and added to the wines produced in lesser years to improve the blend. Dr. Jules Guyot explains this process in his seminal work *“Culture de la Vigne et Vinification”*:

“Not only does one add shipping liqueur to the wine, but when the bottling has been done in poor or mediocre years, one also adds a proportion of wine from a great year which has been set aside for this purpose. This is called *recoulage*². One blends, for example, the mediocre wine from 1874 with 10% or 15% or 20% of wine from the great vintage of 1846. Through this blending, the wines of Champagne may present each year and everywhere in the world characteristics that differ very little and are generally very acceptable. Also, the great and rich [*négociant*] houses buy at any price the most significant quantity of wine from the great years. This wine is their treasure, their essence, used to enrich and perfume the wines of the miserable years. A house deprived of old wines of the first quality during a series of mediocre years is a house undone, lost to the market.”

This blending was called *“recoulage”* because the reserve wines that Dr. Guyot mentions were stored in bottles (or magnums) and literally *“repoured”* into the blend. Guyot also mentions the reason for this: to maintain the consistency of the blends. As the method became codified, this type of blending became the accepted practice, and in time, no other way was known. François Bonal explains in his excellent book *“Le Livre d’Or de Champagne”*:

“If one blends only wines from a single year, one has what one would call today a vintage. In the 19th Century, this

2 Literally *“re-pours.”* This term is no longer used.

word did not exist³, and the notion was somewhat hazy. At the beginning of the 1830s producers began to date some labels, but rarely, and only to signal a year that was truly exceptional, notably for the British and American markets⁴. Simultaneously, however, wine merchants and connoisseurs, particularly in England, often refer to the years of production, even when they are not indicated. It was only from 1865 that Champagne that in principle did not contain any reserve wine began to be marketed, every two or three years in France and more frequently in England. Nevertheless, the vintage only occasionally featured on the label, at least until the 1870s.”

George Saintsbury makes a further reference to the 1865 vintage in his *“Notes on a Cellar Book”*, published in 1920: “And, taking well-known brands all round, I do not know that I was more faithful to any than to Krug. I began my fancy for it with a ‘65, which memory represents as being, though dry, that “winy wine,” which Champagne ought to be, but too seldom is. And when, just fifty years after that vintage, I drank farewell to my cellar before giving up housekeeping, it was in a bottle of Krug’s Private Cuvee, 1906.”

In addition to documenting the 1865 vintage, Saintsbury’s comment is interesting because it speaks to another characteristic of vintage Champagne – its vinosity. When Saintsbury praises it as a “winy wine,” he is referring to precisely that quality that sets vintage Champagne off from non-vintage blends. The non-vintage blends are crafted on purpose to reduce the differences between vintages. Just the opposite is the case with vintage wines, where the differences between vintages are their very *raison d’être*. Most often, a vintage wine is made when wines have greater ripeness than usual. Usually, the base wines also have firm acidity and abundant dry extract. It is this combination that endows a wine with vinosity. This character makes vintage Champagne a “winemaker’s wine” in the words of Frédéric Panaiotis, Chef de Caves at Champagne Ruinart.

3 Bonal’s footnote here reads, “The 19th Century term in England for Champagne constituted of wines from a single year was vintage wine, or one said more simply, vintage.”

4 Bonal’s footnote: “One finds labels of sparkling Sillery crowded with the mention “Celebrated vintage of 1834.”

André Simon has given us invaluable information regarding the origin of vintage Champagne in his 1905 work *“History of the Champagne Trade in England.”* He explains:

“Shippers used to sell their wine in very small lots to suit the requirements of their customers, whether they had only a blend of several years to show or an exceptional vintage wine such as the 1834, 1842, 1846, 1857. In this last case, there was nothing to indicate the vintage, either on cork or label⁵ and wine merchants bought it in very small parcels, and during as long a period as the size of the cuvée, and the amount of the demand allowed.”

He goes on to note: “The vintage which was sold at the highest figures ever paid for Champagne in London was that of 1874, probably the first strictly speaking vintage and Brut or Nature Champagne shown in England,” and that “Messrs. Perrier Jouët were one of the first to indicate the year of the vintage on their labels, and Messrs. George Goulet did so when they showed their 1870 vintage. The branding of the corks with the year of the vintage was only adopted universally later on, the last shipper but one to do so being Messrs. Heidsieck, who never branded any of their wines before the 1889s; the last were Messrs. Pommery, whose 1892 was the first cuvée bearing the date of the vintage on the corks and labels.”

Bonal, citing Henry Vizetelly, who wrote several works on Champagne in the late 19th Century, documents which vintages were sought after during the 19th century “Here are the very good years of the 19th Century, according to his [Vizetelly’s] research and observations, and according to other, later witnesses: 1802, 1806, 1811, 1815, 1818, 1819, 1822, 1825, 1834, 1840, 1842, 1846, 1848, 1857, 1865, 1868, 1874, 1880, 1884, 1889, 1892, 1893, 1898, 1899. One must add that 1875, which gave the largest harvest of the Century, has sometimes been praised for its quality...” In contrast, André Simon sees the matter somewhat differently and discerns top honors on these 19th Century vintages : 1802, 1804, 1811, 1818 and 1819, 1822, 1825, 1832, 1834, 1842, 1846, 1857, 1862, 1865, 1868, 1870, 1874, 1880, 1889, 1892, 1893, and 1899.

⁵ Simon’s footnote: “In most cases, there were no labels whatever, but simply a small foil round the cork and the top part of the neck of the bottle.”

Among the oldest surviving bottles that still exist today were found in a shipwreck off the coast of Finland in 2010. It is thought that the wreck occurred in the 1840s. Among the cargo were 168 bottles of Champagne attributed to the house of Juglar. This house existed between 1804 and 1829 when they merged with Jacquesson. There were several bottles sold as “circa 1820”, which sold for up to €24,000. The same wreck contained bottles of 1841 Clicquot, which sold for €24,000.

Another instance of “shipwreck” champagne was that from the wreck of the Jönköping, a Swedish vessel torpedoed by a German U-boat in 1916. In 1997, divers recovered an estimated 3,000 bottles of Heidsieck “Goût Américain” 1907 from the wreck. These bottles of Heidsieck have been described in the press as selling for “\$275,000 per bottle,” although this price stems from a private transaction between anonymous parties at the Ritz Hotel in Moscow at an undisclosed date. Several bottles of 1907 Goût Américain traded at documented commercial auctions, and it commonly sells for \$2,000 - \$4,000 per bottle. I have been privileged to taste the wine twice in my career at Christie’s, in 2008 and in 2009. I remember the first bottle as a total loss, and the second as pleasant, at least “interesting.” The problem, however, is that as is often the case, these old bottles can fail to live up to expectations. As one would expect, the wine is mature and may well be oxidized. Most often, they have no bubbles. Finally, they usually are very sweet, since before the 20th Century, Champagne was served as a dessert wine. Tests indicate that the dosage of the Heidsieck “Goût Américain” 1907 was 165 g/l, and analysis of the 1841 Clicquot showed a dosage of 149 g/l. (For a discussion of sugar levels in Champagne, see the glossary entry under Brut).

The combination of this level of sugar with a complete lack of mousse and an evolved nose makes the wine a beverage completely unlike Champagne today. For me, it is difficult to compare these very old wines with the ones I enjoy today. For this reason, I rely on contemporary authorities to inform my opinion of some of the early years of the century. My experience of other venerable vintages suggests that the quality of

the bottles that remain today is highly variable. I have found bottles as old as 85 years of age that still have bubbles, while in other instances bottles only 30 years of age have begun to lose their mousse and to show definite signs of aging. Whether you find these bottles enjoyable or even acceptable depends on your frame of reference. If you come from a long experience of tasting old white Burgundy, you will probably like these wines more than if you approach them from a background of drinking youthful wines.

As champagne ages, it goes through several changes, some of which are unique to itself. As with many white wines, the non-rosé champagnes gradually deepen in color, changing from straw yellow or light lemon yellow to gold, and then to amber and ultimately to brown. Rosé champagnes also deepen in color, varying from pink to salmon to copper and finally to umber, with the rim losing color more quickly than the core.

Next is the evolution of the aromas. I feel there are two parts to this. The first is an evolution as with the wines of Burgundy that moves from fresh fruit aromas gradually take on more lactic character, moving toward cream and butter, and eventually to butterscotch and caramel. With even more time, the wines will develop a bouquet of truffle and forest floor (which the French call *sous-bois*). Distinct from this is the change in the character of the aromas coming from the yeast. This aspect, called the autolytic character, is a smoky type of aroma. At the outset, it resembles lightly buttered toast, then brioche, and finally, smoke and ground coffee appear. If it goes too far, there is a suggestion of soy sauce. This autolytic transformation is a complex process since it depends both on the length of time on lees before disgorgement and on bottle age.

Next comes the changes in texture. The first to be remarked is the change in the bubbles or mousse. The pressure overall decreases with time, and the size of the bubbles diminishes. Smaller bubbles change the texture of the mousse from one of “fizziness” like sparkling water or soda to one of “creaminess,” bringing the wine more of a velvety texture. At the same time, the wine goes through a deceptive transformation as

it appears to lose acidity and gain sweetness. In fact, the amount of acid declines imperceptibly in chemical terms, and there is no additional residual sugar over time. This change is instead the result of what is called the “Maillard Reaction” occurring in the aging Champagne. This reaction is an interaction between an amino acid and a non-reducing sugar molecule, similar to the browning of steak or other food during cooking. It is essentially a form of caramelization, but in Champagne, it happens without heat.

Mature Champagne is not for everyone. I hope, however, that the readers of the present volume will join me in its appreciation. With time and tasting experience, you will learn what age Champagne best suits you – do you prefer bright, newly disgorged Champagne, or do you start to swoon only when it reaches twenty, or thirty, or forty years from the vintage date? Do you prefer champagnes with extra time on the lees or those that have much post-disgorgement aging and relatively less time on the lees? I hope the present volume will help you to know your preferences and to better appreciate vintage Champagne.